Volleyball Annual 2000 • NU's John Cook

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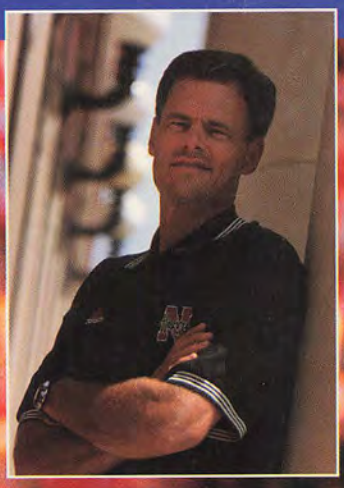

Aaron Golliday

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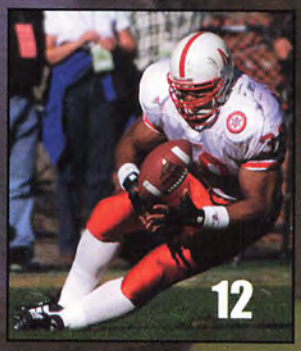

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your sports magazine

SEEING RED

How would you like to be one of the 20,000+ Notre Dame fans who unloaded their tickets, at a handsome profit to be sure, for the Sept. 9 game against Nebraska?

Not only did you miss a tremendous football game, but you contributed to the sulling of your school's proud name and tradition. Notre Dame, and its fans in particular, took a terrible beating in the press after at least 25 percent of the crowd for the Huskers' thrilling 27-24 win showed up wearing mostly red and not a stitch of kelly green.

It was unthinkable to many that such a number of fans of the fighting Irish could let go of their prized seats in storied Notre Dame Stadium. In retrospect, many surely would not have sold their seats had they known their team was going to put up such a great fight. Even in the defeat, Notre Dame improved its stock to the point that the Irish moved up in the polls. Only Notre Dame can lose and move up.

But the fans in South Bend were fairly sure that not even the ghosts of Knute Rockne and Geroge Gipp could rally the boys for this one. Why go to the game when I can pocket $500 or more of another kind of green and watch the game onthe Notre Dame Broadcasting Network (a.k.a NBC)? After all, when you're watching at home the boys are down, you can also reach for the clicker.

It makes me wonder if Nebraska fans could ever do such a thing. People who were born since 1962 find it unimaginable. That was the year Bob Devaney came to town and erased most memories of Nebraska's less-than-successful years in football. But, yes Virginia, there was a time when fans rattled around in Memorial Stadium on game days. A sprinkling of spectators found plenty of good seats and plenty of elbow room at the old stadium when it seated less than 40,000 to begin with.

As one long-time Husker fan told me, you could close your eyes and fire a gun into the stands back in those days and odds are you wouldn't hit anybody. Then along came Bob and sellouts were the norm.

But let's fast-forward to the unthinkable: It's five years from now and through some twist of cellestrial fate, Nebraska has found itself in the land of mediocrity where Notre Dame is now. At least, where Notre Dame was perceived to be after slipping to 5-7 last season. The Irish have returned to power and are coming to Lincoln in 2005. Their fans are offering ludicrous sums of money just for a ticket to the game. It's on NBC coast-to-coast, so Husker fans from the Haymarket to Hebron can pull up a comfy chair and watch it on the tube, until such time as the expected blowout gets out of hand.

Would the Husker fans do it? My guess is some would, but never in such numbers as we saw in South Bend. Let's face it ... $500 to a $1,000 buys a lot of Runzas and is a pretty good return on a $50 odd investment. When you're expecting your team to get taken to the woodshed by the evil invaders, why not take the money and run? But by and large, I think Nebraska fans would still show up and still support their team. And if not, they would rather turn on the tube and see an empty seat than one occupied by a fan of the foe.

But let's keep happy thoughts and presume that decision never needs to be made.

PC

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ADMINISTRATION

Publisher	Nebraska Sports America, LLC
President	Rick Yngve

EDITORIAL

Editor	Paul Clark
Photo Editor	Eric Francis
Art Director	Peter Fahner
Graphic Designer	Erin Reiten
Contributing Editor	Kevin Warneke
Photographers	Bob Berry
Columnists	Terry L. Henion John Knicely
Writers	Chuck Green Terry L. Henion Bob Jensen Sam McKewon Dennis Sexton Michael Watkins

CIRCULATION/DISTRIBUTION

Administration	Penny Thelen
Accounting Office	Karen Kennedy

SALES/ADVERTISING

Sales Manager	Ken Hayden

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No Longer Reluctant

by Kevin Warneke

Sara Parks didn't want to go.

As an eighth-grader, Parks' father took her each Wednesday night to practice with the Papillion-LaVista volleyball players during open gym. "I was really timid. I didn't want to go."

Funny thing, Parks soon realized she could hold her own against the older, more experienced Papillion-LaVista players. And, she realized volleyball could be her ticket to a college scholarship.

Parks, who earned Class A all-state honors last season as a junior, committed in July to play volleyball next year at Nebraska. Her decision wasn't difficult. Although she participated in track and basketball as an underclassman, Parks said she decided as a junior that volleyball was her sport.

"I wanted to stay close to home," said Parks, who initially considered playing at Montana and Northern Michigan. "Going to games to watch Nebraska really fired me up. It was always my dream to play at Nebraska, but I never thought it would happen."

While attending Nebraska's camp for individual players, Parks said, she took a liking to the Husker coaching staff and facilities.

The Huskers coaches told Parks, who's 5-foot-8, they'll use her as a defensive specialist at Nebraska, which is fine with the Papillion-LaVista senior. She's played defensive specialist in club volleyball – and realized that's where she's best suited.

"I wanted to stay close to home," said Parks, who initially considered playing at Montana and Northern Michigan. "Going to games to watch Nebraska really fired me up. It was always my dream to play at Nebraska, but I never thought it would happen."

This season, her coach, Gwen Egbert, has high expectations for her outside hitter, just as Parks has high expectations for the Monarchs.

Last season, Parks led the Monarchs in digs, aces and passing, and was second in hitting.

"Her greatest strength may be her basic athleticism," Egbert said. "She makes a lot of plays." A 20-inch-plus vertical jump doesn't hurt.

Papillion-LaVista, which qualified for state last season but lost in the opening round to Bellevue West, returns four starters. Parks said the Monarchs have the potential to contend for the state title, something they did her sophomore season when they lost in the finals to Lincoln Northeast.

Last season, the Monarchs found themselves outmatched and outclassed by Bellevue West, something Parks contends won't happen again.

"We'll be ready," she said.

Parks and her Monarch teammates spent the summer preparing for this season. The Monarchs attended Nebraska's team camp in July and also spent a week working with a coach from Northern Michigan. They spent their first month after school dismissed for the summer working out and practicing.

PHOTO BY ERIC FRANCIS

During three weeks off in July, Parks still worked out every day at a fitness center, except for a week's vacation in Lake Okoboji.

All this effort, Parks said, should pay off this fall. Papillion-LaVista should be considered one of the favorites in Class A this season, Parks said.

"I want to win for Coach Egbert. She hasn't won a state champion." nsa

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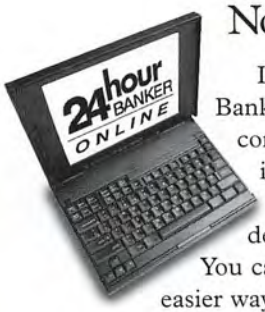

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Between the lines

BY JOHN KNICELY

First Things First

Those of us on the late night news team at Channel 6 know what to expect as NBC presents its coverage of the 2000 Summer Olympics from Sydney.

Once again Bob Costas is dictating our bedtime by the waggle of his tongue. The guy has an extraordinary gift for gab even when it seems all possible talking points have been exhausted. He made that very clear four years ago as studio host for the summer games in Atlanta.

Of course our professional impatience is not necessarily shared by late-night Olympic viewers who can simply reach for the light switch when NBC finally signs off for the day. In our circumstance the workday continues.

I gained a whole new perspective in '96 when I watched reporters from other cities prop up droopy eyelids as well.

We were stationed together in an old cement floor warehouse near downtown Atlanta that had been transformed by NBC into a makeshift newsroom. For a hefty fee, network affiliates could buy in the consortium and use the facilities to provide local coverage to the folks back home.

The arrangement included "live" reports via satellite at the conclusion of the network coverage which usually extended well past the midnight hour. So it was a rather tenuous as tired and irritable journalists waited each night for the final word from Costas.

At the same time NBC proved very efficient in managing the needs of so many reporters with so many deadlines.

The roof of the warehouse offered a great view of the Atlanta skyline and to take advantage of that, a wooden platform was constructed on top of the building with enough space to line six cameras side by side. Each day reporters were assigned a specific time and camera that at the appropriate moment would be dialed in to the newscast coordinates back home.

It was the modern day version of the Tower of Babel: six people, spaced two yards apart, simultaneously speaking to designated cameras about totally different issues. As chaotic as it was to transmit from the rooftop in Atlanta, the delivery to Omaha and other cities around the nation always seemed in perfect order.

There were equally difficult challenges during the '84 games in Los Angeles. Our "live" reporting there took place in front of the Coliseum, which was the gathering point for Olympic fans from around the world.

The broadcast position was secure but transportation to that location caused great insecurity. Traffic was horrendous and several reporters from other cities unwittingly became no shows for their assigned broadcasts. And one frantic afternoon the same almost happened to me.

Olympic wrestler Abduriham Kuzu and I already were late in leaving the Olympic Village for a live interview when we drove straight into three lanes of gridlock. At that point the broadcast deadline was at seven minutes and counting.

There was little choice but to leave his brother with the car and sprint the final 10 blocks. We arrived in front of the camera during commercial with roughly forty-five seconds to spare.

Fortunately Kuzu's training gave him the stamina for a lengthy response to my winded introduction and during his close-up I was able to hyperventilate off camera.

That extra effort from the Olympian who lived in Lincoln is still much appreciated but it was a standout from south Omaha who really provided a memorable moment in Los Angeles.

Jim Hartung played a key role in the '84 gold medal performance by the U.S. men's gymnastic team. He and I had a pre-arranged meeting place outside Pauley Pavilion for an interview after the finals because local stations were not given access to the interview room.

I was fortunate to have a ticket and watched Hartung and his teammates capture the gold. But as I observed the pandemonium that followed it became clear that our rendezvous was in jeopardy.

Hopes were fading as my photographer and I stood fretting outside the security fence when the sudden rattle of chain link startled us. We looked up to see two hands gripping the top and then the familiar legging of the US Olympic warm-up suit. Moments later we were face to face with Hartung who had scaled the eight-foot fence with gymnastic agility.

It turns out he was a gold medal winner on the run. ABC had made a last-minute decision to whisk the team off to the studio for a live interview.

Hartung had other plans.

He first wanted to share the biggest moment of his life with family members who were waiting outside the venue and he had also promised me a visit. So he ran through the building and escaped over the fence.

Our interview was in progress when a distraught ABC field producer rudely interrupted us. She reminded Hartung that the national audience was waiting.

Much to my satisfaction the gold-medal winner firmly informed the insistent producer that she and the national audience would have to wait.

It's that Olympic experience that will give me necessary patience as I wait for the conclusion of the network overruns in Sydney. I'll just remind myself that on one glorious occasion, the network had to wait for me. nsa

John Knicely is news co-anchor at WOWT-TV (Channel 6) in Omaha.

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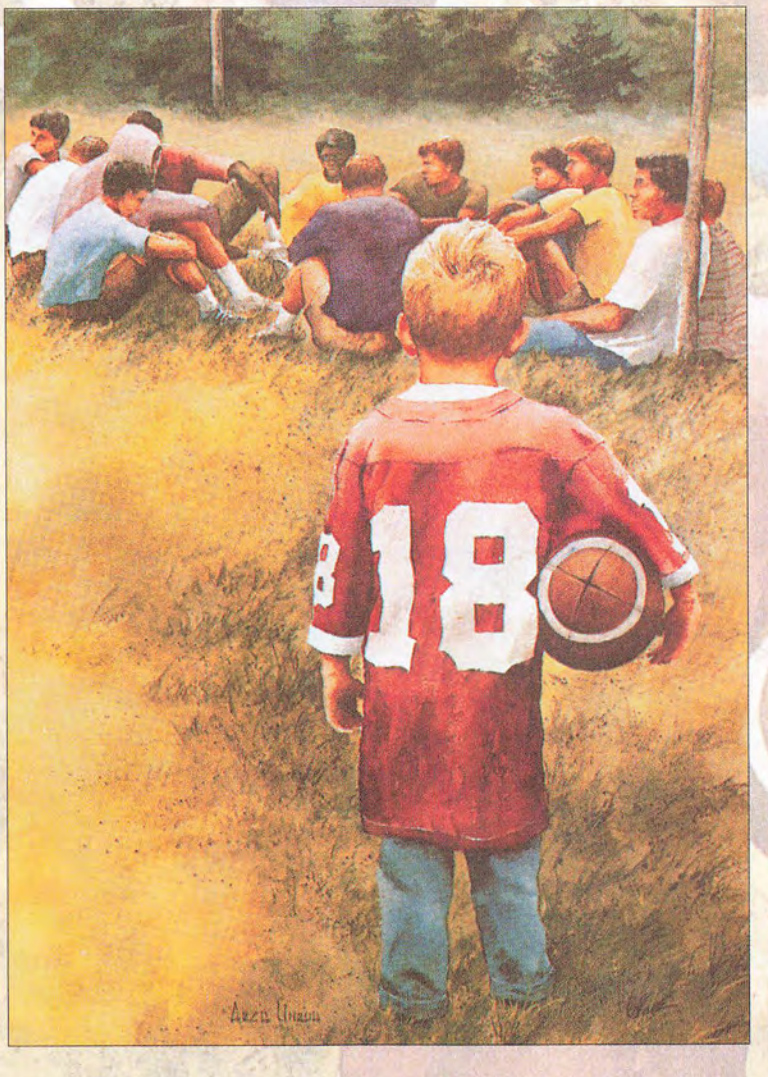

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Fumbles

by Terry L. Henion

They've banned the "F" word around the University of Nebraska football environs this season.

You can say "turnover." You can say "miscue." And in some extreme cases, you might even be allowed to say "bobble."

But no more "F" word.

The word "fumble" officially has been stricken from the Husker vocabulary. And with good reason. In 1999, Nebraska "skill" position players coughed up the pigskin 49 times and opponents recovered 25 of those. That dubious statistic led the nation, something Husker coaches are not exactly trumpeting in an otherwise sterling 12-1 season, complete with a romp past Tennessee in the Fiesta Bowl.

Husker quarterbacks, running backs and receivers found every conceivable way to fumble the football. There were botched center snaps. There were muffed punts and kickoffs. There were savage hits from opposing tacklers that jarred loose the ball. And there were the more comical bobbles: a pass slipping out of a quarterback's hands and the sight of a running back, in the clear, inexplicably just dropping the ball.

The Huskers' collective case of

Fumbles

"dropsy" was at least consistent: at some time or another during a game – any game – NU fans knew their beloved Big Red would be rolling the ball on the carpet like a craps player rolling dice.

Nebraska's artful dodgers had holes in their pockets the whole season.

"We went back and looked at all the film and there didn't appear to be any one thing that you could be a finger on," said Dave Gillespie, Nebraska's running backs coach. "We fumbled the football for just about every reason you could come up with.

"One of my concerns was that perhaps our guys were thinking about not fumbling right before the moment of contact and maybe not being as aggressive as we want. But that didn't happen. I'd like to think that, as a group, our guys are about as physical and aggressive a bunch of runners as there is in the country."

Husker coach Frank Solich spent most of last season addressing, or trying to anyhow, the fumble "problem." By season's end, Solich's jawbones began working overtime at press conferences because the knew the "fumble question" would be asked.

"It did get pretty tiring," Gillespie said. "We were doing everything we could to alleviate the problem. There are only so many drills that you can do. And it seems like the more you talk about it, the more it happens. So this season, we just aren't going to talk about it."

Opponents can read statistical sheets, too. One defensive coordinator in the North Division of the Big 12 said Nebraska's fumble problem was part of his team's defensive game play. The coach, who didn't want his name used for obvious reasons, said his team concentrated on tackling the football and attempting to wrench it free during practice leading up to the Nebraska game.

"It didn't help us much. They pretty much had their way with us," the defensive coordinator said. "But it sure is something that you have to try when a team is struggling like they were last year. They took pretty good care of the football against us, though."

Gillespie said much of a Husker practice is built around "protecting the football."

"We try to build that into everything we do here offensively," Gillespie said. "We reinforce it constantly."

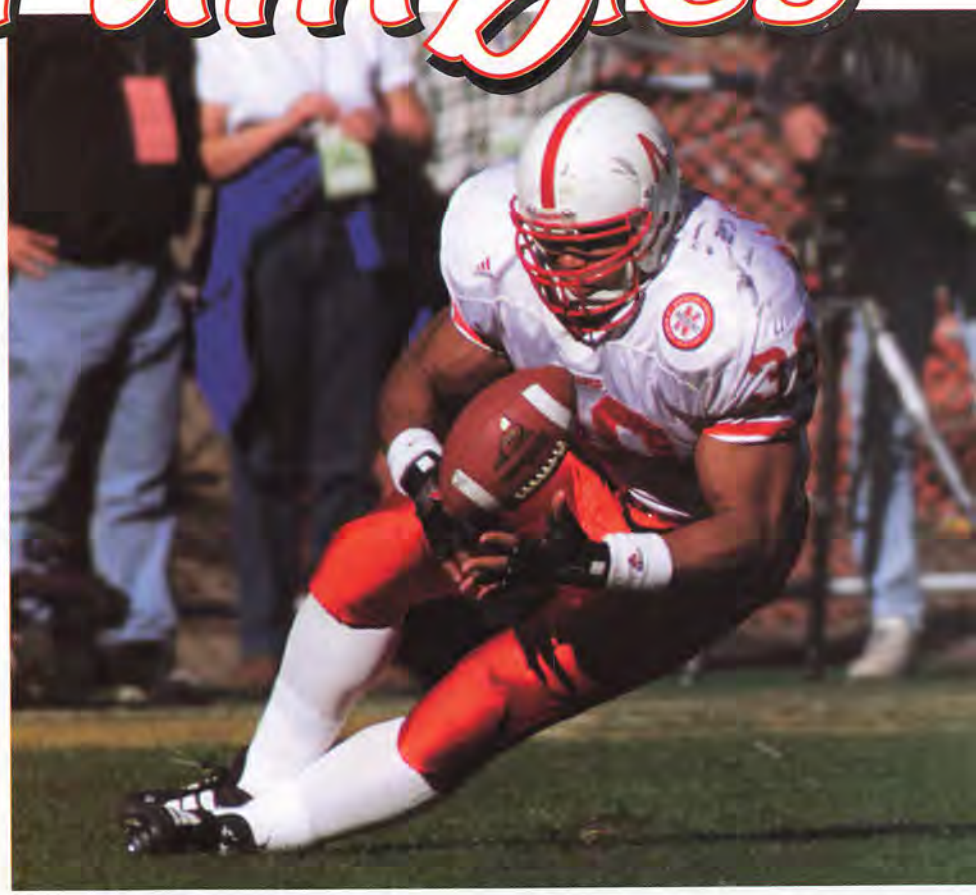
Was there anything more the Husker coaches could have done to help plug the fumbles' leak in 1999. Perhaps...

Dr. Jack Stark, the athletic departments coordinator of performance psychology, said there are several useful mental techniques and tools that can be used in situations such as the Huskers' collective fumble problem.

"There are mental drills where you try to implant a catch phrase perhaps in the running back's mind as he carries the football," Stark said. "Maybe you would use something like 'lock and load.' Just some mental phrase that would help you concentrate on protecting the football."

But even Stark's help with mental preparations apparently didn't stem the tide of Nebraska's fumbles last year. Except for one thing: Stark was never asked to help.

"I never said anything but I was kind of shocked that they never called me in to help with this thing," said Stark, who has served in his capacity for 12 years. "There were a couple of times when radio stations and TV sta-



Fumbles

tions and newspaper guys were asking me questions about the fumbles and I just had to hem-haw around it because I had never been asked to help."

Stark said he was about to be interviewed on televison at the height of the Huskers' fumble problems and just before he was to go on the air, the interviewer informed him that Stark would be called "The Fumble Doctor" during the interview.

Stark managed to politely stall the interview.

"I couldn't hardly comment on something on which I had not been asked to participate," Stark said. "But everybody seemed to think that I was probably heavily involved in working with the team to help solve the problem. The fact was, I had never been contacted about helping."

It seems illogical that Stark had not been involved. After all, his job description with the Husker athletic teams labels him as "using the newest motivation and visualization tools to help NU student-athletes improve their mental skills for athletic performance."

Stark has been given high marks by Husker coaches during his 12 years of service with the teams for helping Nebraska athletes improve their mental performances.

"It was probably just that they thought they could correct it or solve it on the practice field," Stark said. "But sometimes, it just isn't that easy."

That facts are these: Nebraska's multi-option offense fumbled the football more in 1999 than any other team in the country by far. And the Huskers also lost more fumbles than anybody. Despite that, Nebraska lost only once in 13 starts (and yes, a fumble cost them dearly in the lone loss).

Gillespie said the attitude of the players and coaches is that what happened in 1999 was an aberration and likely will not happen again.

"We just haven't done much different to get ready for this season than we have to get ready for any other season," Gillespie said. "Our players are as aware of how many times we fumbled last year and they are determined not to let it happen again.

"And as part of that, we have decided not to dwell on it, not to talk about it. Sometimes when you do that, it seems the problem just gets worse."

If the Huskers are keeping mum about the fumbles, that is not the case in every coffee shop and tavern across Nebraska. Nearly every "how will the Huskers do this year?" question is followed by do you think they will be able to hold onto the darn football this season?"

"We know everybody will be watching closely," Gillespie said. "All we can do is our best." nsa

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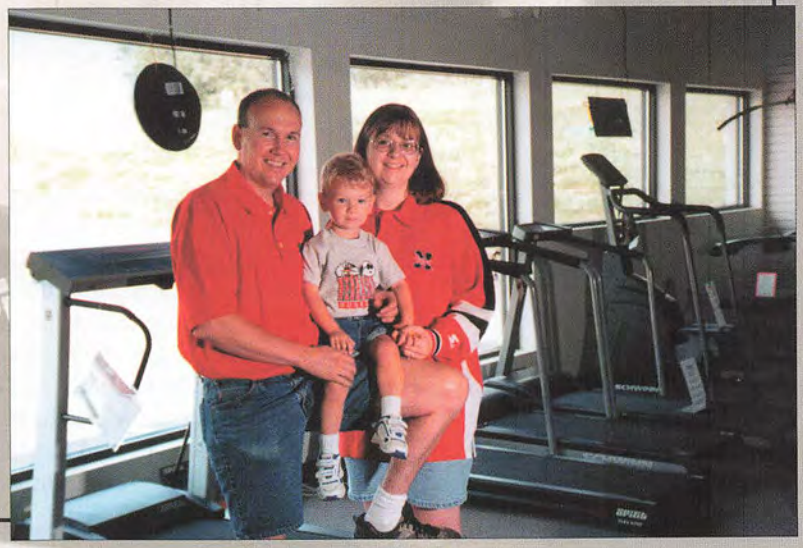

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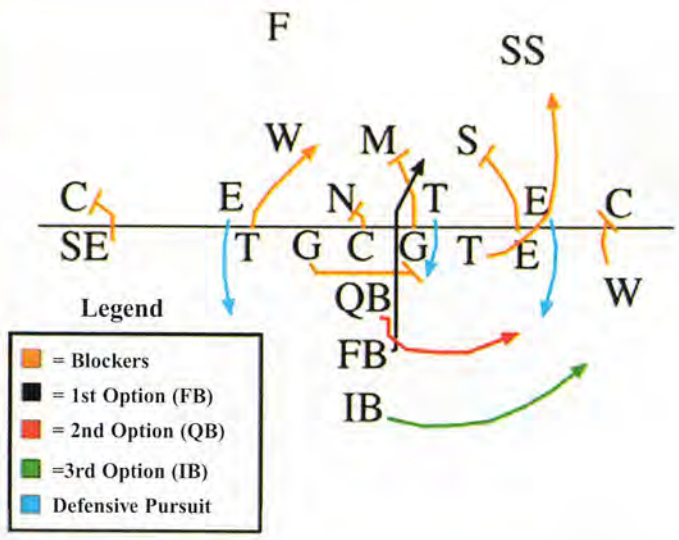
CHALK TALK

PLAY OVERVIEW

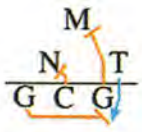
Amazing as it may seem, the triple option has only been Nebraska's bread-and-butter play since 1980. Before Tom Osborne adapted the play for regular use out of the I-formation, it was primarily run out of a wishbone or full-house backfield. After his struggles with Oklahoma in the 1970s, Osborne revamped the Husker offense and began recruiting athletes specifically to run the option. Today the I-formation is almost the default formation for running the option, as it spreads the field more effectively and allows the offense to better tailor their personnel to the needs of the play. In the triple option, the quarterback can hand off to the fullback, keep the ball himself, or pitch to the I-back. In almost every type of option, a defensive player is left unblocked; he is the 'option' man. The quarterback makes his read off of this player to determine whether to keep or pitch – in this play the DE is the option man.



OFFENSE

Using the entire width of the field, the triple option works well against all kinds of defenses. It provides opportunities to make plays with QB reads and cutback lanes, and presents balance between power and speed in the backfield. The purpose of the option is to make the defense focus on several areas of the field, and on several different players, thereby opening up some of those areas and players. It is a play that is not only reliable as a go-to tool, but it also offers big play potential on the ground. You only need a few good blocks, a little over-pursuit, or a missed defensive assignment to turn a small gain into a big one. The option also is valuable in ball control strategy: allowing the offense to maintain possession of the football, keep the opposing team's offense off the field, and let the clock run.

OPTION 1 - THE FULLBACK

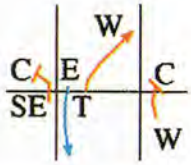


The QB's initial read is on the play-side DT. Before the play, he checks the formation to ensure that the line will be able to make their blocking assignments and reads the placement of the DT to ensure that he is outside the OG. If the DT is inside the guard, the FB handoff is not an option, and the QB knows that either the outside will be open or that he will find a nice running lane off-tackle. After the snap, the QB reads the same play-side DT. If the DT stays outside of the guard (who is blocking down on the MLB) the FB is a good option; as long as the back-side guard makes his trap-block on the DT the offense can count on at least 3-5 yards. If the DT is slanting in, putting him right in the path of the FB, the QB is forced to move on to Option 2.

OPTION 2 - THE QUARTERBACK KEEP

The QB now heads down the line, reading the option man (usually the DE or OLB), in this case the DE. He also looks for a running lane along the line. In a short yardage situation, or if a large seam develops, the QB will often take the first opportunity to turn up field. If no seam opens up along the line, he options off of the defender. The read is made from the option man; if he covers the IB, the QB will keep the ball and run with it himself. If, however, the option man commits himself to the QB, Option 3 is triggered.

OPTION 3 - THE PITCH



The QB, without even needing to look (thanks to hours of practicing together and thousands of reps), pitches the ball straight into the arms of the IB who now either races for the corner or finds a cutback lane. The IB has to make a read to the outside to see whether he can get to the sideline and turn up field or whether the defense has over pursued and created a lane for him to cutback over the middle. This is the ultimate make-or-break of the play. Either everyone has executed perfectly and the IB has a clear path to the end zone, or he needs to make a play himself, or he will be tackled and the play will end.

POSITIONS

An over-pursuing defense is susceptible to the FB handoff and to cutbacks by the QB or IB. A defense that stacks up in the box (inside the tackles) is vulnerable to a quick pitch and a speedy IB around the end. The key to a successful option, how-

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ever, is the QB. He needs to be able to make the quick read (knowing whether to make the give to the FB), to get down the line reading the option man, to make a good decision, and to give an accurate pitch if necessary – all in the span of about two seconds. The success of the play at this point depends on the blocking done by the line and by the receivers. The offensive line must get a good surge, allowing the quarterback an unencumbered path. They then must get to their assignments quickly, cutting off pursuit by defensive linemen and linebackers, and they must hold their blocks until the play has fully developed. One of the most overlooked requirements of successful option football is the play of the receivers. Many offensive schemes simply require that receivers run downfield on running plays, taking their defenders with them. Not so in a well-run option. Receivers are crucial in protecting the outside and in blocking downfield. A well-placed block by a receiver can be the difference between a 5-yard again and a 50-yard touchdown.

Blocking Scheme

Because the first read in the triple option is the FB handoff, it is imperative that the trap block in the middle is well-executed. The C zone-blocks against the play; he is responsible for the gap immediately to his left. In this play, the NG is in that gap, though it could be a blitzing MLB or a stunting DT. The backside G pulls behind the C to the playside, picking up the first person to cross the line of scrimmage. In our example, this is the DT but, again, could be a LB or NG. The playside G releases on his first man (who the pulling G should pick up), heads over the middle, and picks up the next man he comes to (in this case, the MLB). This zone blocking scheme allows the line to adjust to blitzes, stunts, and slants and prevents the blockers from taking themselves out of the play following a specific player.

The next section of the blocking scheme involves the outside portion of the line on the play side. The TE's zone responsibility is to seal the outside, blocking toward the middle of the defense. In this play, we have him picking up the SLB, letting the DE go outside him. If the DE crashes down, though, the TE will pick him up, leaving an OLB or SS as the option man. The playside tackle pulls around behind the TE, and is responsible to block inside out, letting the first player outside him pass. This is the option man, and will either be the DE, OLB or SS.

The final element of the blocking scheme takes place downfield. The backside T releases at a 45 degree angle into the defensive backfield. His main purpose it to pick up a S or retreating LB, creating a cutback lane for the runner (should he get that far). The next potential downfield block can come from the FB. If the FB doesn't receive the ball, he should try to continue into the defensive secondary, picking up anyone he can. Once again, a good block in the secondary can help create a lane for the runner to come back through. The last, and one of the most important parts of successful option blocking, is the play of the receiving corps. The goal of the receivers is to give contact to the DB, take him outside, and seal. Good blocks on the DBs destroy the defense's outside containment and open up the sideline for a long run.

Defense

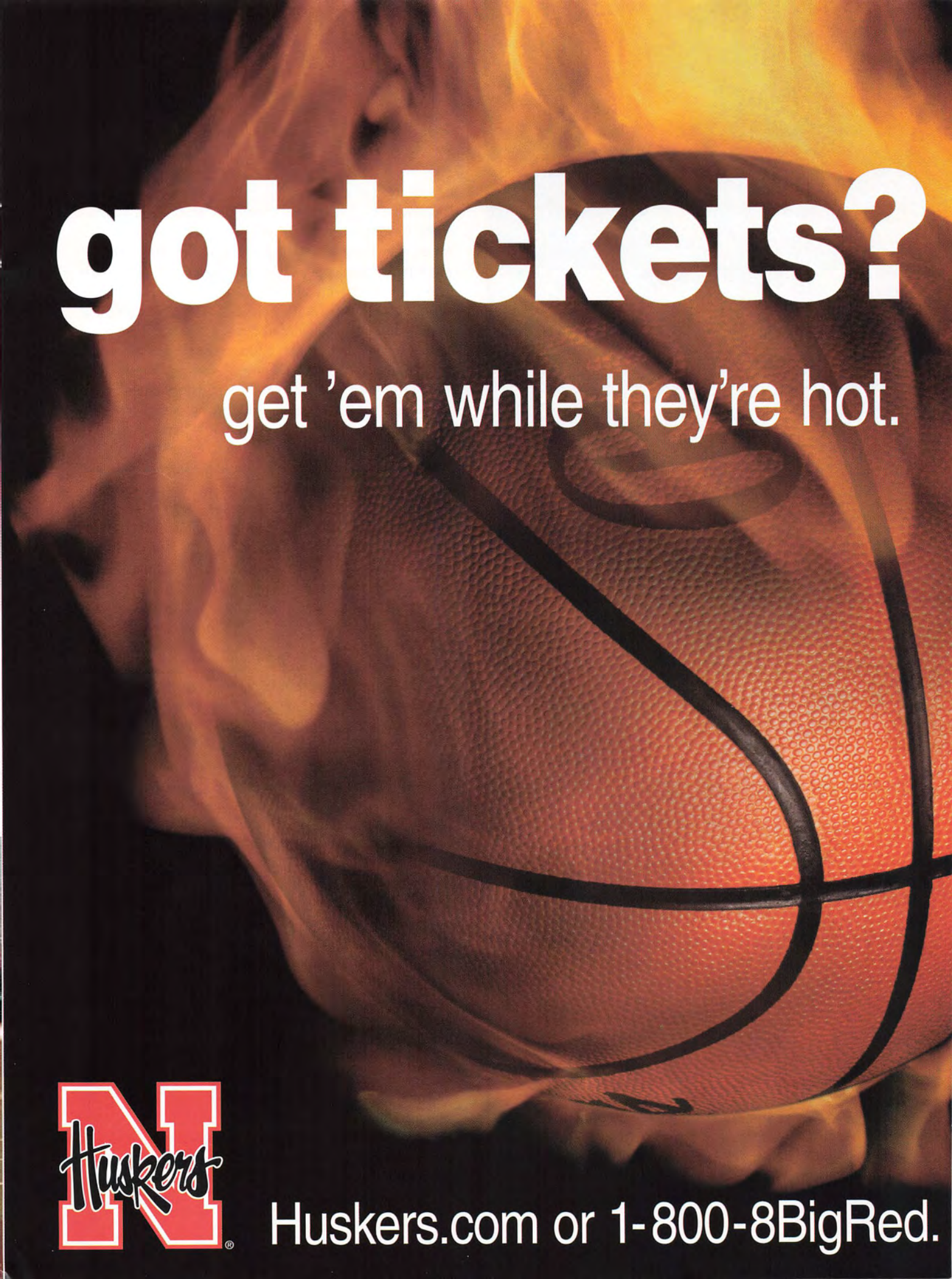
There are a couple of keys to containing the option: defensive end containment and linebacker speed. The role of the defensive end against most any offense is to contain. Coaches preach over and over to their DEs: "No one gets outside you! Ever!" If a DE can penetrate on the snap, keep any potential blockers at bay, and force the play inside of him by keeping on the IB, the QB will be forced to turn the play up the field early. One of the keys to running the option well on offense is to 'get to the corner' quickly, which means getting around the DE so that the QB and IB have a straight sideline in front of them. A good, strong, quick DE can keep the offense from 'getting to the corner'.

Quick linebacker pursuit also is important. Linebackers often are charged with covering the QB on an option, and the quicker they can read the play and get to the outside (where the QB may be cutting up the field or trying to get around the end), the more effective they will be in keeping the QB from getting into the open field. LBs have to be careful not to overpursue; this can open up cutback lanes for the QB/IB. But if your LBs can step up towards the line of scrimmage and flow with the play, they will have a good chance of stopping an option.

Penetration on the defensive line can also help to disrupt the option.
Because the QB wants to fake the handoff to the FB and then get around the end as quickly as possible, he is going to try to stay as shallow (close to the line of scrimmage) as possible while he's moving laterally along the line.
If a DT or NG can break through the line, he can disrupt the flow of the play and often break up the relationship between the QB and IB, taking away the pitch option and forcing the QB to scramble.

Summary

The option is at the same time a very simple and a very complicated play. The concept of it is very easy to grasp, and most of the individual assignments are fairly basic. The complexity lies in the number of reads and the number of possible ways for the play to develop. Timing and location also are very important, making the option better suited to being the cornerstone of an offense rather than a "trick play." The complexity of the option also makes it a very difficult play to stop regularly, which helps to explain why teams dedicated to the option as a system of football often experience a great deal of success running the football. Just ask Tom Osborne. nsa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Photos by Eric Francis

Huskers VOLLEYBALL

Could we be seeing a repeat of 1995? National Championships in football and women's volleyball?

The Dream is Alive!

by Sam McKewon

This is new Nebraska Volleyball Coach John Cook. Open. Easy smile. Talks with his hands. Expresses astonishment at the glut of media covering his team, even though it's been this way for years. Relates to his players. Preaches confidence, not caution. Makes risky predictions – like when he mentioned at the opening season press conference that his Cornhuskers, who will play without All-American outside hitter Nancy Meendering this season as she redshirts, were only ranked No. 11 in one volleyball preseason poll.

"If there's 10 teams in the country better than us," Cook said, "it's gonna be one hell of a season. Because we don't plan on being No. 11." This is not Terry Pettit. This is not the coach who built the Husker program to win national titles, whose seeds spread to the entire state of Nebraska, which produces an abnormally high number of high school volleyball prodigies for a state of its size. Nor is Cook, who was first an NU assistant from 1988-1991, the coach who treats the media with a poker face. Pettit, who retired last season, essentially hand-picked Cook to lead NU into a new century of college volleyball, plucking him away from Big Ten power Wisconsin, using him as an associate head coach for one season, then turning over the reins. In other words, the coach who won a national title 1995 knew he was a picking an opposite personality, as well as a coach who preferred to stay on the cutting edge of the sport, rather than employ Pettit's mix of mental philosophy and strategy training. "They're like night and day," said outside hitter Angie Oxley. "I'd have to say they're not much alike," setter Jill McWilliams. And now, Cook said, he has to prove those differences won't make for significant changes in win and losses. He knows, quite well, the pressure is on.

"I've got to prove that my system – that my way works," Cook said.

In more ways than one, Pettit is the impetus Cook's ascension to the NU job. Had one match turned out different Cook might not be in Lincoln, and Pettit might still be coaching. It was a five-set marathon match in the Regional Finals of the 1998 NCAA Tournament, as Pettit's Huskers and Cook's Badgers battled for a spot in the Final Four, which just happened to be scheduled for the University of Wisconsin campus. Had Cook won, it's likely he may have stayed a cheese head, he said in later interviews, especially if UW had found a way to upset eventual national champion Long Beach State for the title.

But Nebraska prevailed 12-15, 18-16, 9-15, 15-10, 15-10 and advanced. Not long after, Nebraska assistant Cathy Noth left the program. It opened the door for Pettit to hire Cook, who already been a successful head coach and had international experience with the 1992 U.S. Men's Olympic Team. Citing "the lure of coming back to Lincoln was too strong," Cook did return in the spring of 1999, and immediately put his stamp on his team.

It started with his physical training techniques, which radically differed Pettit's philosophy. In fact, Pettit had little to do with the physical side of the team, McWilliams said.

"He left that pretty much up to the trainers to take care of," she said.

"Coach Cook is more hands-on."

The Huskers started stretching and running drills to improve conditioning. Cook would play music to help ease the sessions. Instead of the team coming in cold to Cook's training regimen last spring, they had a year to adapt, making the transition easier.

In the one year Cook was the assistant, he basically coached the defense. He refused to talk about whether or not Pettit would retire after the 1999 season. When it happened, few were surprised, and Pettit moved to a coaching advocate position in the athletic department. And Cook went about putting his stamp on the program.

He hired new assistants. He added a director of volleyball operations to the office staff. And he orchestrated a

18-day trip to China that he now cites as the main bonding factor between the coaching staff and the team.

"When you're together for 18 days with nothing but each other," Cook said, "you don't have much of a choice but to stick together."

On the trip, the players further learned what was already evident to many program outsiders; Cook better related to his players than his former boss.

Pettit will never be mistaken for an easy read – at times, his demeanor was best described as enigmatic. There is less mystery and more openness with Cook.

"He's likable and intense and he's really motivating," McWilliams, who expressed surprise when Cook said NU's 2000 squad could beat the 1999 team with Meendering nine times of 10. "It's so much easier to play when you have that type of confidence behind you."

But both McWilliams and Oxley have a harder time explaining Pettit. "He had his ways, is the best example." McWilliams the prospect of analyzing Pettit with shrug.

But Pettit's ways, as subtle as they may have been, were immensely successful. His 1995 team was the first outside of Hawaii and California to win a national title (NU has since been joined by 1999 champion Penn State).

His system has developed one great setter after another, and before he left, he may have recruited the next great Husker in 6-foot-2 Greichaly Cepero, who starts as a sophomore this season. And, just as Cook said, his system now has a chance to prove itself like it once did at Wisconsin. The early season schedule included No. 1 UCLA and No. 13 Colorado State. The Huskers will play the season without Meendering, who practiced with the U.S. Olympic team much of the summer and will redshirt to rest and prepare for a final season in 2001.

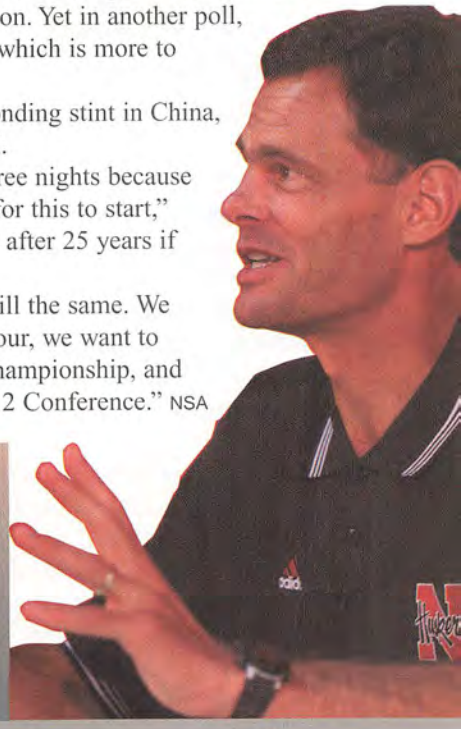
So a top ranking, without NU's best player, doesn't seem all that surprising, considering Nebraska finished 11th in the final last season. Yet in another poll, the Huskers were No. 6, which is more to Cook's liking.

This team, after a bonding stint in China, is how he likes it, as well.

"I haven't slept in three nights because I've been so pumped up for this to start," Cook said. "I don't know after 25 years if (Pettit) felt that way."

"But the goals are still the same. We want to be in the Final Four, we want to compete for a national championship, and we want to win the Big 12 Conference." NSA

"I've got to prove that my system – that my way works"



Super Natural

by Michael Watkins

To describe UNO volleyball player Nikki Mastny as intense would be an understatement.

The superstitious nature of her pregame rituals leaves nothing to chance – and everything to the supernatural. Take a look at these examples:

She makes sure there are two stickers – one of Tigger and the other of a turtle – affixed to her right ankle brace before each match.

"It has to be Tigger and a turtle," Mastny said. "My freshman year, Lisa Webster, also a freshman, wore a Chiquita banana sticker instead, and tore her right ACL during a match. I can't have that happen to me."

She crosses her index and middle finger on her right hand, covering her heart and says a prayer during the national anthem. She also counts 11 stars on the flag – the same as her jersey number.

"It's something I've done since I was in high school," she added. "In high school, I used to cross my fingers and put my hand behind my back during the anthem, but now we hold hands during so I cross them over my heart instead."

She wears an orange ribbon in her hair for each home game for good luck – and something has been working to her advantage. The Mavericks went 14-0 at home last year, even in games Mastny didn't play because of a broken bone in her right foot. She still wore that orange ribbon on the bench.

"I like to keep the same rhythm before the match. It keeps me centered and grounded and confident," she said.

"She's one of a kind, there's no doubt about that," said senior teammate and frontline bookend Tracy Ankeny. "Her intensity is one of the first things I noticed when she arrived here as a freshman. She has this determination I've never seen in anyone before. She hates to lose and will do everything she can to make sure that doesn't happen."

Regardless of her eccentric approach to the game of volleyball, her coach, Rose Shires, knows there's definitely something special about this kid from Norfolk, Neb.

"Nikki is extremely unique," said Shires, who recruited Mastny in 1998. "She is one of the most competitive individuals I've ever met. She definitely runs to the beat of her own drum. But I also think she's misunderstood. People look at the cover of the book and don't look inside it. There's an outstanding person inside."

Last year was a breakout season for Mastny, despite missing seven games in the heart of the season with the foot injury. She finished second on the team in kills (371), kills per game (4.17), digs (318) and blocks (94). She also was tops with 1.06 blocks per game, and ranked among the top three in kill percentage (.321). This followed a freshman campaign when she started all 32 matches and led the team in block assists (99) and total blocks (111).

For her performance in a limited capacity in 1999, Mastny was named second-team American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) All-America and all-Region squads as well as to the all-North Central Conference team.

Photo by Eric Francis

Continued on page 22

MAVERICKS WANTED!

See the UNO Mavericks break out of the herd in an all-new season of the area's most exciting college football. The action starts at 7:00 p.m. on Saturday, September 9, when the Mavs take on Nebraska-Kearney. The excitement continues Saturday, September 30, at 1:00 p.m. vs. St. Cloud State.

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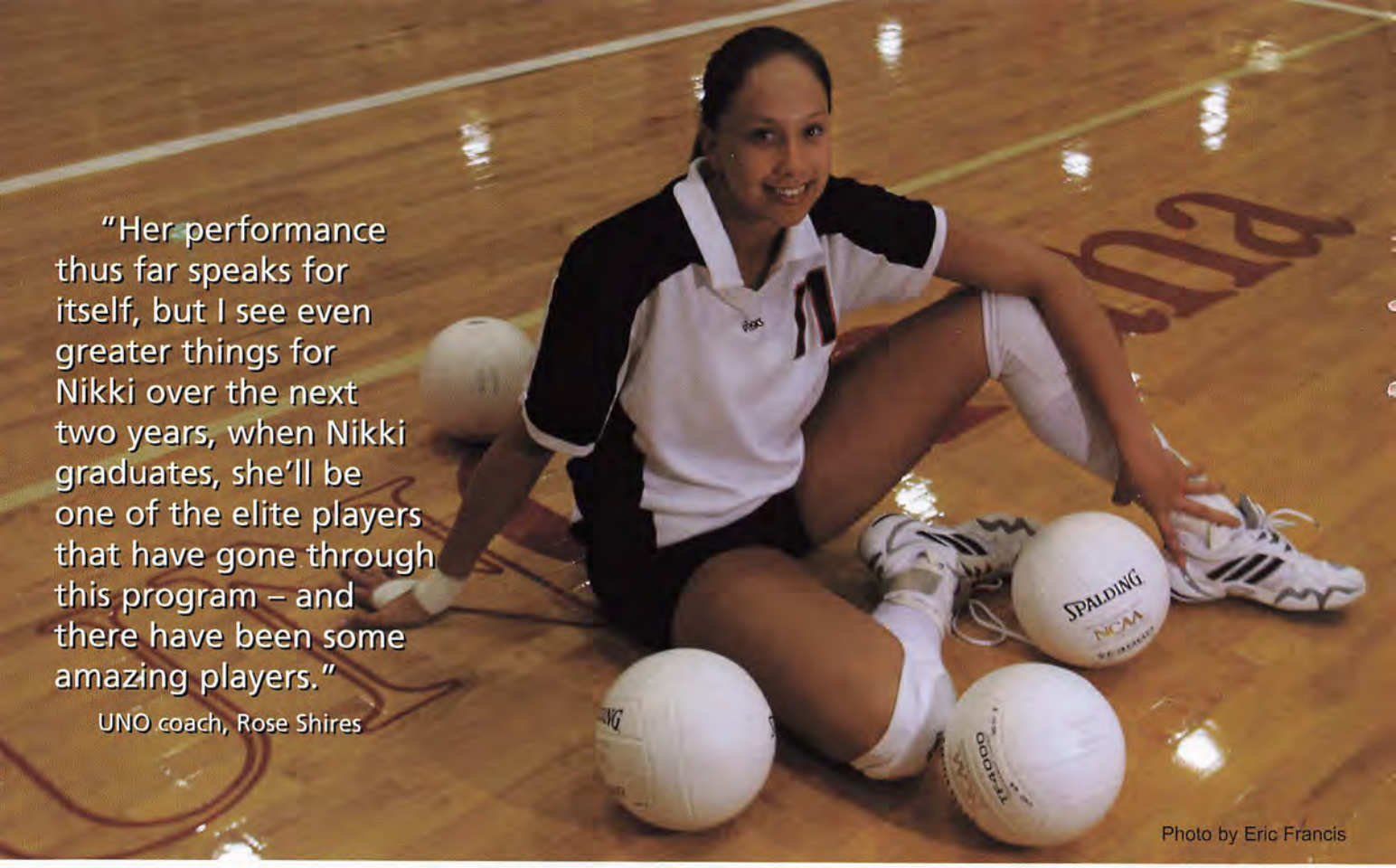
"Her performance thus far speaks for itself, but I see even greater things for Nikki over the next two years, when Nikki graduates, she'll be one of the elite players that have gone through this program – and there have been some amazing players."
UNO coach, Rose Shires
SPALDING
NCAA
Photo by Eric Francis

In turn, UNO finished with a 27-5 record and won the North Central Conference before losing in an NCAA II Regional to conference foe Northern Colorado.

Think of what she and the Mavericks might have accomplished during a complete season.

Shires does.

"She had an amazing season last year, and I absolutely expect her to light it up again this year," said Shires, who has coached the UNO women for the past 11 seasons. "I think (her numbers) last year would have rivaled Tracy's in kills, and she would have gotten even more recognition.

"I also think she would have been thought of as the premiere right side (hitter) in the nation. Nikki is one of the people we think is very versatile along the front because she can play right, middle or outside. She's definitely the best blocking player that we have on our team. She has a way of controlling the net like few players I've seen."

At just 5 feet, 9 inches tall, Mastny doesn't exactly tower over the net waiting for balls to cross her path. Along with a tremendous vertical leap, she has another asset that creates problems for opponents.

"I have extremely long arms and fingers for my height," said Mastny, a sophomore education major. "My strength coach calls me 'arms' because I have such a long wingspan. They definitely make up for my lack of height. They must give me another 4 or 5 inches at the net."

Spires believes there's another reason Mastny is so effective at the net.

"She's so versatile; that's what makes her such weapon," Spires said. "She can play any position along the front, and we don't lose any of our effectiveness or efficiency. We've changed the role of her position. Normally, right side is not the predominate hitter, but we're using our middle hitter to decoy for Nikki and give the ball to her 50 to 60 percent of the time. That's how effective she is."

Mastny admits her frontline skills have always been her strength, but this past off-season it's been her back row, defensive skills upon which she's spent the most time — improving her all-around game.

"We've only got eight players this year, so the players on the floor have to be able to play an effective rotation because we won't have as many substitutes," Mastny said. "Knowing this, I've been working on my defense and passing skills, hitting lots of balls and really hustling."

One thing's for sure. If Mastny has it her way, the Mavericks' season won't be ending in their final regular season match at North Dakota State.

"We may be short in numbers, but we're big in heart and determination," said Mastny, one of five returnees to a team ranked No. 8 in NCAA Division II preseason rankings. "I envision us reaching the Elite Eight, if not further. That's my goal. That's what we're all working toward."

It's that fiery desire and outspoken attitude that leads Shires to believe when her career is over Mastny will rank high among the UNO volleyball elite.

"Her performance thus far speaks for itself, but I see even greater things for Nikki over the next two years," Shires said. "When Nikki graduates, she'll be one of the elite players that have gone through this program – and there have been some amazing players."

She's crossing her fingers and counting, too. nsa

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

by Dennis Sexton

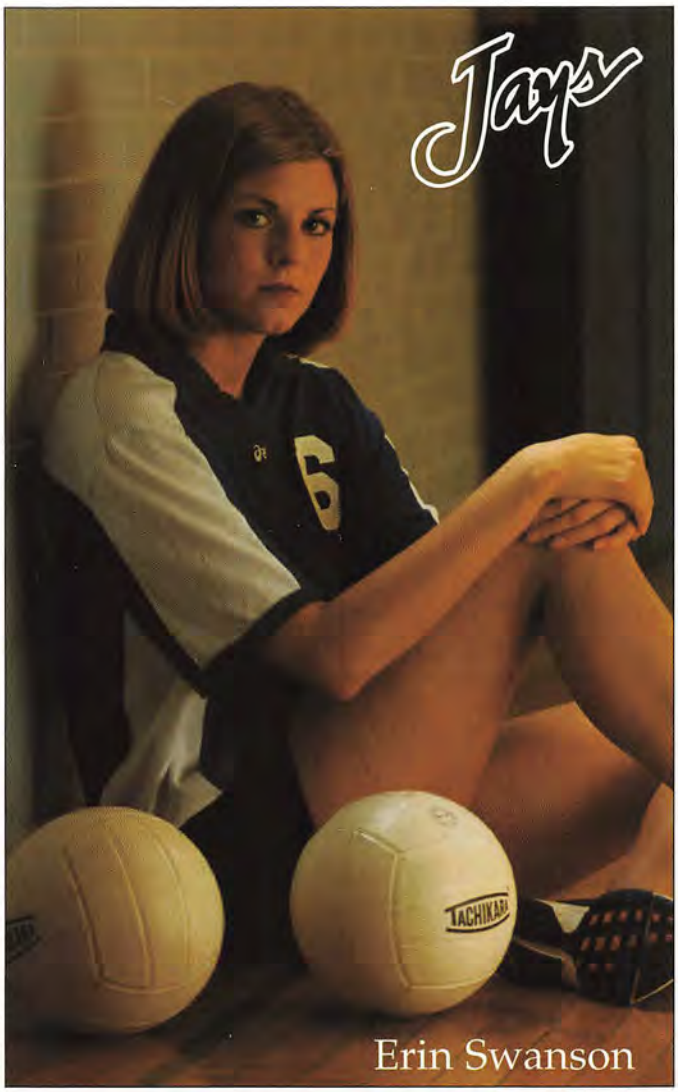

Photo by Eric Francis

While 51 million people tuned in to hear sole survivor Richard claim that respect "for the way he played the game" got him the million dollars, the Creighton volleyball team was scrimmaging in the hope that this is the year they will get what they seek.

No, not a million dollars.

With powers University of Nebraska-Omaha and the Nebraska Cornhuskers grabbing all the volleyball headlines in the area over the past few years, Creighton believes it is now ready to get some R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

And the emergence of one player in particular could be key in the Bluejays attaining the degree of recognition that they seek.

"I just want to play as best I can and help this team improve and play well. The team always comes first and I could care less about the number of kills I have or how many digs I get," outside hitter Erin Swanson said.

Her numbers, however, will have a large impact on the success of Creighton. With a schedule loaded with nationally-ranked squads throughout the season, Swanson will need to put up solid numbers if the Bluejays hope to take that next step.

The 6-foot junior out of Omaha Burke High School will be looked to be a steady compliment to middle hitter, and first-team all-conference performer, Melissa Walsh.

"We've had to be a middle attacker-oriented team," head coach Howard Wallace said, which he explained can lead to lower kill percentages due to the quicker sets needed in that style of offense.

"We have not been as strong in the past at outside hitter," Wallace said. "Erin has been a big part of getting our offensive style in line.

"Opponents are going to key their defense on Melissa and that opens up the outside for Erin."

Where Swanson can use her powerful hitting ability to put points away for the Jays.

But the strong right shoulder that's responsible for those kills needs to remain healthy. Swanson missed 6 1/2 weeks her freshman year with rotator cuff problems and battled through soreness at times a year ago. Swanson hopes a summer of dedication to the weight room has put her injury problems to bed.

"I did it to keep my strength up; I don't want injuries to set me back," Swanson said. "I've rehabbed hard.

"She's been extremely diligent with the trainers,"

Wallace said. "And everyone noticed her commitment to the weight room.

"Kids in other sports would notice Erin and say, 'That one girl's in there all the time'," Wallace said. "They were talking about Erin."

For Swanson, putting in the time is part of the responsibility of being an upperclassmen on a young team. She understands that she's looked to provide leadership to a team still finding its way.

"I believe that if you're a Division I athlete that you should be in tip-top shape all the time anyway. I just play...and play like I remember how much I love this game," Swanson said.

"We need her in more of a leadership role. That gets easier as you get older and when you know you're going to play," Wallace said. "She understands that responsibility – we want all of our players to do that.

"She knows what she needs to do."

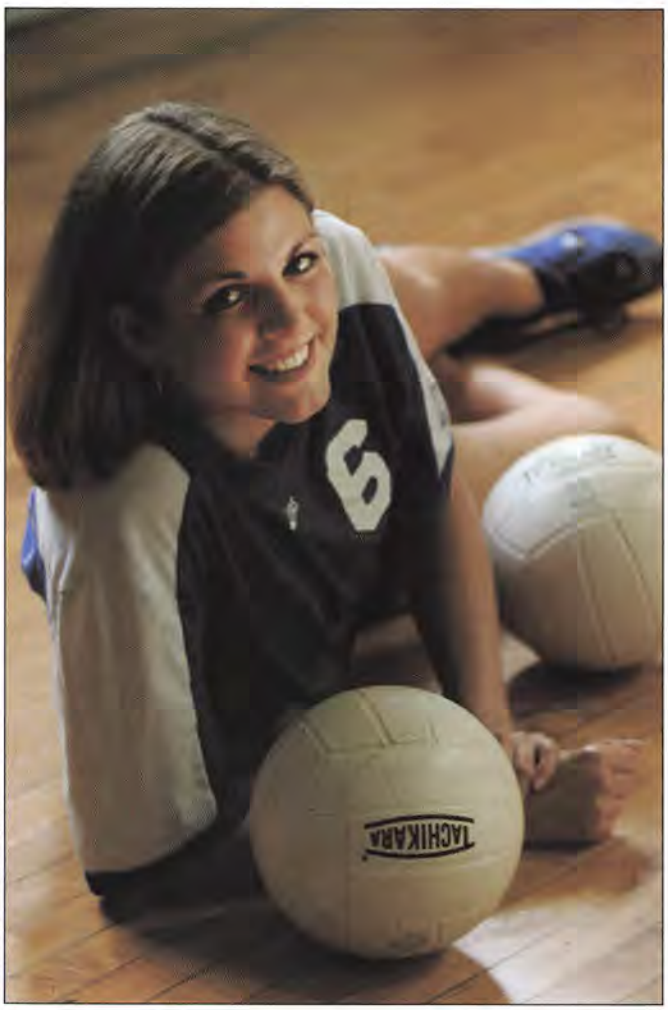

Photo by Eric Francis

When arriving at Creighton, Swanson's knowledge was a bit cloudy. Not of the game of volleyball itself, but of volleyball as it pertains to the Bluejay program.

"Howard is very particular with technique and getting things done in a particular way. In high school, technique wasn't everything – just so long as you got the job done," Swanson explained. "He's very picky with the upperclassmen because he figures if you've been here for a couple of years, you should know how to do things.

"But that's the way it should be. It makes you bear down on yourself...you know how it has to be."

"She struggled her freshman year with adapting her game from high school, but now she's really coming into her own," Wallace said. "She learned how to use technique to become a better player. Erin has always been able to hit the ball hard, but she needed to make some adjustments.

"It became easier for her to be coached - a different style. There was emphasis on different demands and she accepted those things," Wallace said. "She's more comfortable now with how she's had to change her game technically.

"She got through those struggles and fought through some injuries and has become a leader," Wallace said.

The hard times have provided Swanson a maturity that will help her in handling the expectations placed upon her; maturity that will also be needed to handle the demands of the schedule that awaits Creighton.

Three nationally-ranked opponents (Hawaii, Nebraska, Northern Iowa) await the Jays, who seek to live up to the preseason expectations of a fourth-place finish in the Missouri Valley Conference.

"We have enough experience to know how to play in big games," Swanson said. "Our work ethic is a lot better, we're more mature, and we know what we need to do to get things done.

"Inexperience stopped us from having a better record last year," Wallace said. "(This year) we're on the verge. The expectations are higher but I think we can do well."

"I think we can open up some eyes," Swanson said. "We want other teams to know that Creighton's a good squad.

"We're the kind of team that will be down (two games to none) and then come back and take the next three games. We're a never say die kind of team; we're a very positive team that never gives up."

One that won't give up until it gets what it wants.

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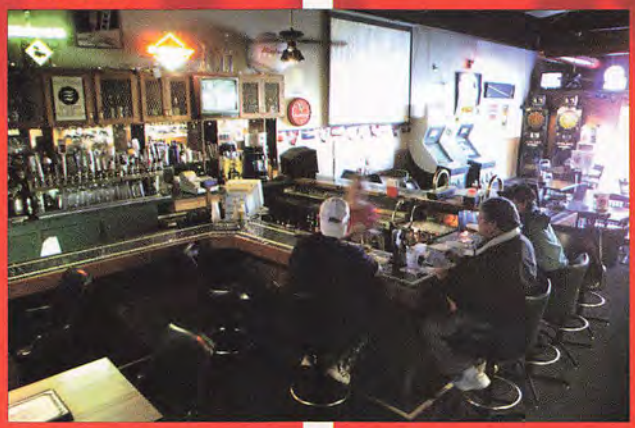

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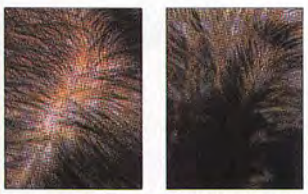

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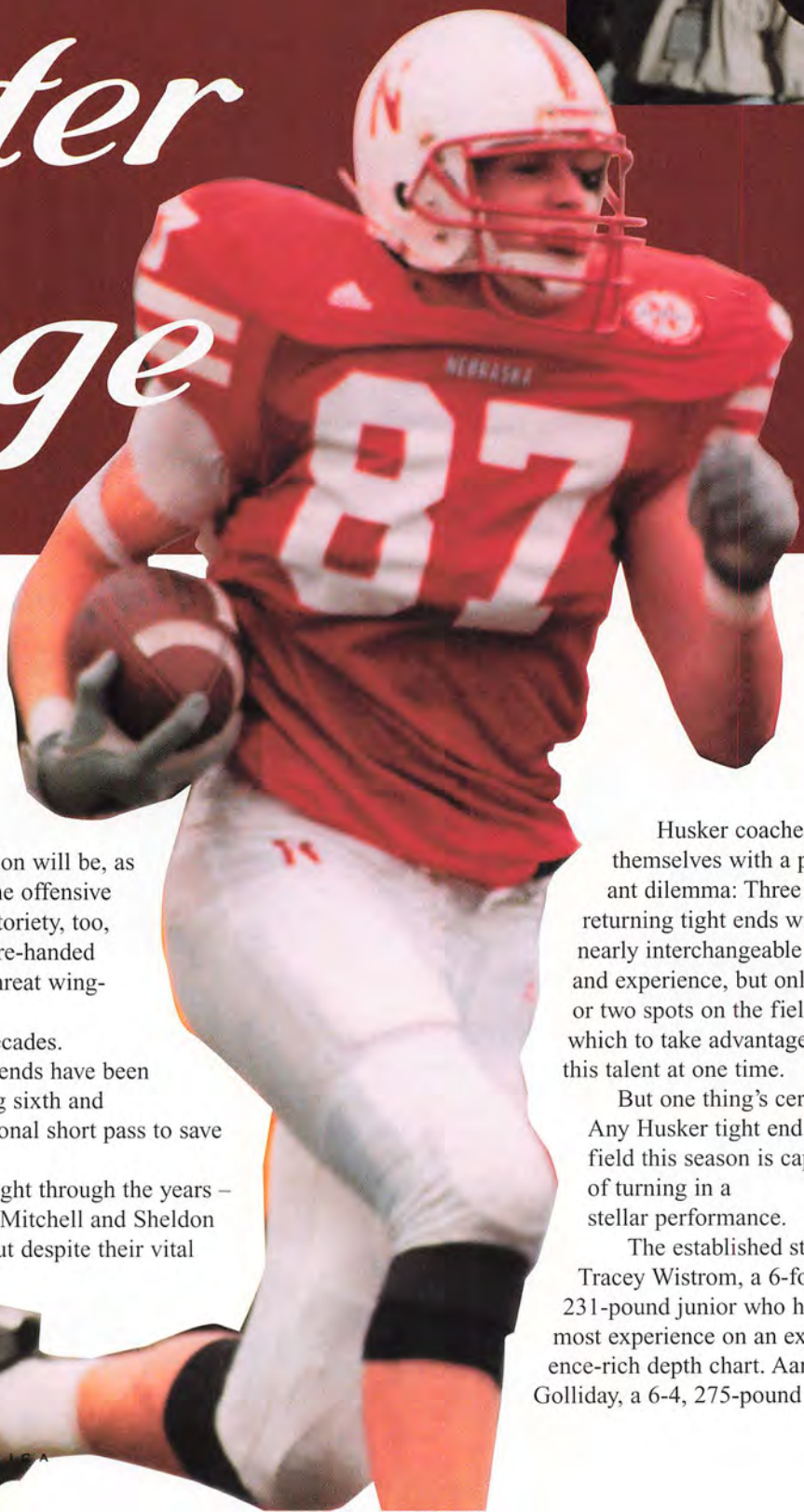
cover story

Huskers

Ready for Center Stage

by Chuck Green



Tracey Wistrom

When the curtain goes up on Nebraska's 2000 football season, some familiar stars will fill the lead roles in the annual epic known as the Cornhusker offense.

This fall, as usual, the headliners of the vaunted Husker I-spread formation will be, as usual, the I-backs and quarterbacks. The offensive linemen will garner much deserved notoriety, too, as will the fullbacks. There's even a sure-handed split end and a speedy, do-it-all deep threat wingback to steal a few scenes.

It's been the same story line for decades.

But traditionally, Nebraska's tight ends have been confined to supporting roles: becoming sixth and seventh linemen, or catching an occasional short pass to save a hurried quarterback.

A few have stepped into the limelight through the years – Junior Miller, Jamie Williams, Johnny Mitchell and Sheldon Jackson come immediately to mind. But despite their vital supporting roles, they usually aren't quite ready for prime time in Nebraska's offensive scheme of things.

Until this season.

Husker coaches find themselves with a pleasant dilemma: Three returning tight ends with nearly interchangeable talent and experience, but only one or two spots on the field in which to take advantage of this talent at one time.

But one thing's certain: Any Husker tight end on the field this season is capable of turning in a stellar performance.

The established star is Tracey Wistrom, a 6-foot-5, 231-pound junior who has the most experience on an experience-rich depth chart. Aaron Golliday, a 6-4, 275-pound red-

Dodge Different.

"If we click on all cylinders, I think you're going to see a lot of great things out of this offense that maybe you saw four, five, six years ago, we have that type of marquee team again, where all the pieces are in place. We just have to perform.

If we do, we could put on quite a show."

– Tracey Wistrom

shirt sophomore from York, is penciled in as Nebraska's No. 2 tight end, while Lincoln Southeast grad and fellow redshirt sophomore Jon Bowling (6-3, 240) is listed at third-string.

With Nebraska's traditional three-man rotation at the position, neither Bowling nor Golliday worry much about missing out on their shares of playing time.

"I don't think any of us are too worried about not getting on the field enough," Bowling said. "We all know we're going to play, and we all know what we have to do. And really, for a while, Aaron and I are still learning the ropes."

Golliday agreed.

"We're all friends, and the competition is very friendly," he said. "But we all know who should start, and Jon and I know we're going to be around for a few more years. Our days will come, this year and beyond."

For now, success at the tight end position begins and ends with Wistrom. Although he started only one game last season, against Colorado, he played early and often, making the most of his time on the field.

Wistrom showed he was ready for prime time as a sophomore, hauling in 16 passes for 429 yards and two touchdowns. What he didn't have in size and blocking ability, he made up for on the stat sheets.

This season, though, Wistrom's top priority is to improve his blocking skills. He gained weight during the off-season, tipping the scale at 231 pounds — "The heaviest I've been, ever," he says, almost sheepishly — and spent much of this past summer's informal team workouts honing his footwork and initial-contact technique.

"Toward the end of last season, I was weighing 210 or 215, right around there," Wistrom said. "In our scheme, it's hard to get done what the coaches want to get done. I hope that this year, I'm more able to do that. Carrying the extra weight, I feel a little bit stronger, so hopefully, in the blocking area, I'll be a little bit more effective. I'd like to become devastating."

Wistrom isn't shy about soliciting advice on handling defenders from his brother Grant, a former Husker All-American rush end and a starting defensive end with the Super Bowl champion St. Louis Rams.

"Especially my first year here, as a redshirt, Grant helped me out tremendously," he said. "I was on the scout team and had to go up against him and (former Husker rush ends) Mike Rucker and Chad Kelsay every day. You can't help but get better going up against guys like that. Now, I still talk to him some about tips on leverage and things NFL tight ends might do to him.

"I definitely try to take those things out on the field with me."

Still, if blocking is an area in need of improvement for Wistrom, his pass-catching ability is an area of expertise.

Last season, Wistrom's average of 26.8 yards per catch broke Johnny Mitchell's 1990 yards-per-reception record of 25.64. His receiving average may have been better if not for a knee injury that kept him on the sidelines for the Huskers' Big 12 Conference Championship Game against Texas and the Fiesta Bowl against Tennessee.

Missing the last two games of the season was a hard pill for Wistrom to swallow.

"That was, by far, one of the toughest things I've had to go through," he said. "I just looked at it as a choice between sitting back and moping around and feeling sorry for myself, or helping out the younger guys without much experience, giving them pointers throughout the game. Of course, I took the latter route, and that kept me a lot more involved.

"It made me feel like a real part of the team, even though I couldn't contribute on the field."

Even early in his career, Wistrom showed signs of brilliance. In 1998, as a redshirt freshman, he caught two passes for 84 yards during the regular season, his big play coming on a 63-yard touchdown strike from Monte Christo against Alabama-Birmingham.

But his breakout game came in the Holiday Bowl against Arizona, where Wistrom hauled in three passes for 41 yards, including a 4-yard touchdown catch that put the Huskers ahead 20-16 midway thorough the fourth quarter.

Although the Huskers eventually lost Holiday Bowl 23-20, Wistrom's performance set the tone for last season, erasing any doubts Husker coaches may have had that Grant Wistrom's younger brother was the real deal.

When Wistrom isn't on the field this season, Golliday or Bowling likely will be. Both played significant roles in 1999 season-ending wins over Texas in the Big 12 Conference Championship Game and Tennessee in the Fiesta Bowl.

Against Texas, Bowling caught two passes for 30 yards, while Golliday chipped in with a solo tackle on the kick coverage team. Against Tennessee, Bowling made two more catches for 45 yards. His first reception came on Nebraska's second drive, going for 28

yards. His second grab came in the third quarter, when he hauled in a 17-yarder on third-and-13 to sustain a Husker drive that ended with Nebraska's first touchdown of the second half — a 13-yard toss to Golliday – that put the Huskers ahead 24-14.

For Bowling, though, the most memorable play of the Fiesta Bowl was one most Husker fans – and the rest of the national television audience – probably missed.

In the second quarter, the Huskers ran a pass-back screen to I-back Correll Buckhalter, which went for an apparent 54-yard touchdown. As the play unfolded and Buckhalter sprinted down the sideline, Bowling abruptly cut off the angle taken by Tennessee strong safety Fred White with a crushing blind-side block that sent the Vol tumbling to the turf.

"Oh, that was sweet," Bowling recalled, laughing. "That guy had been talking to me all night, about how I was a freshman, how I never played and all that. After that play, he got up real slow and said, 'Man, you got me. Good hit.'

"I didn't hear too much more out of him for the rest of the night."

Nebraska receivers coach Ron Brown expects fans – and opposing defenses – to become very familiar with his two redshirt sophomores this season.

"Golliday has a chance to be a dominant blocking end," Brown said. "He's a large man, and has good feet. He catches the ball pretty well for a guy his size, and he has the ability to knock people off the football with his strong technique.

"Bowling runs some of the best pass routes on the team and has great hands. I'm excited about this group and, the best part is, they're going to be around for a while."

Brown, who has been a Husker assistant coach since 1987, said he doesn't recall having a tight end roster with as much quickness from top to bottom.

"It's not like they have great speed, but they're quick," he said. "They get to point A to point B very quick. One on one, man to man, they can run. They can shake you down."

With the numbers at the position come the inevitable whispers about moving one of the players to another position – something that doesn't sit well with Brown.

"When they do talk about I try to put some water on that fire quick, baby," Brown said, laughing.

The ever-present specter of injuries that has haunted the Huskers in recent years is one reason Brown cites as needing depth at tight end.

"We haven't gone though a season yet where we haven't had at least one of our major tight ends go down with an injury," Brown said, "so those guys are valuable."

Senior Jake McKee (6-2, 235) and redshirt freshman Trevor Johnson (6-4, 245) round out Nebraska's tight end corps. The Huskers also added Chris Septak, a 6-4, 245-pound Millard West graduate who was regarded by most recruiting experts as one of the top two or three high school tight end recruits last year. Brown said Septak, like all freshmen, will get a chance to prove himself during fall drills, but likely will redshirt.

Aside from their obvious merits, Nebraska's tight ends could play a more significant, albeit secondary, role in the Huskers' success this season.

"Last year, defenses keyed on (wingback) Bobby (Newcombe) so much," Wistrom said. "They double-teamed him a lot, and that might be one reason I was able to get open so often. This year, I might be able to help Bobby and (split end) Matt (Davison) out, because people will be paying so much attention to me."

If that happens, Wistrom said, the Huskers will roll.

"If we click on all cylinders, I think you're going to see a lot of great things out of this offense that maybe you saw four, five, six years ago," he said. "We have that type of marquee team again, where all the pieces are in place. We just have to perform.

"If we do, we could put on quite a show." nsa

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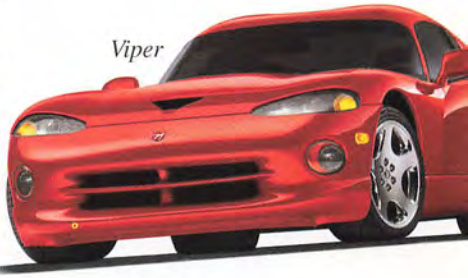

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The Time Is

by BOB JENSEN, HPR Publisher

It's time to WIN a state championship match.

That's how Sheryl Deininger sees it. The past three seasons have ended with her Aurora team losing in the Class B state volleyball finals, but this year it could well be a different story.

Deininger, a striking, 6-foot-tall right-side hitter, is one of five Aurora starters back from last year's state Class B runner-up team. The girl can hit a ball through a car wash and not get it wet and it was that type of power play that helped her earn all-state honors last season.

Making all-state and all was neat enough, but it didn't take away the heartache of coming so close – again – to winning a state title, only to see the other team dance on Aurora's volleyball grave. This time Deininger, a senior in her last go-round as a high school player, wants to be the one dancing.

"Last year we lost to a better team but we didn't play our best and that's the frustrating part," she said, referring to the 1999 title game loss to 31-0 Omaha Gross. The Huskies also lost state finals to Lincoln Pius X in both 1997 and 1998. "A lot of it was we were a young team an several of the girls had never been in a situation like that before."

Deininger has grown accustomed to playing "in situations like that." In fact, she grew up salivating at the idea of someday taking center stage in the big games, the championship games. Her older sister, 21-year-old Kristine, helped foster Sheryl's early interest in sports, leading her down a path toward volleyball glory.

"She was a great influence on me," remembers Sheryl, reflecting on those faraway days of playing pepper in the family front yard. "She's always been pushing me toward sports, helping me become a better player, and she deserves a lot of the credit for what success I have had."

That early interest not only in the sport of volleyball, but also her sister's volleyball career, only added fuel to the fire. She first became interested in volleyball back in early grade school and played her first organized volleyball in sixth grade. Sheryl's natural competitive nature led started pushing her toward stardom.

"I found out fairly early that I wanted to be the best volleyball player I could be," she says softly. "I'm the type of person who has to be competitive at anything I try. If you are that way it will not only help you on the court, but off the court as well, like in getting the best job."

An admitted tomboy as she was growing up, Deininger and her buddy Samantha Crawford played sports, all right...football with the boys, rough-and-tumble soccer matches at the school playground during lunch hour. "We were monsters," Deininger said with a giggle. "We weren't afraid to get dirty, that's for sure."

Today, the 5-foot-10 Crawford joins Deininger in the power-packed Aurora lineup. They are both seniors and are joined by four juniors, including 6-2 Ashley Groothius, 5-11 Cassie Anderson, 5-10 Chelsea Miller and 5-8 setter Missy Kohtz. Jenny Stewart, a 5-8 junior, is likely to contribute as first player off the bench.

Deininger's job is to pound the ball. She enjoys the challenge of beating a blocker – or two – at the net. Some of the credit for her hitting success also goes to the back row players, who call out options for Deininger to deliver the ball. "It looks like we just step up and hit the ball as hard as we can, but there is a lot of strategy to it and the other girls are great in setting me up."

In Aurora's quick-hitting attack Deininger gets to the net in a hurry. She likes the faster pace of the new offense and believes it will benefit her team.

Loaded with power at the net, a great floor defense and plenty of experience, Aurora will begin the season as the consensus No. 1 in Class B. Throw in a talented, veteran coach in Lana Wilken and you've got the whole package. And not only do the Huskies appear to be the best team in its class, Lincoln Journal-

NOW

"Around here we take senior leadership pretty seriously. I have watched the older girls the past couple of years and they have led by example and by encouraging the other players to do their best," she says.

"That's the kind of leader I want to be, too."

Star volleyball editor Ron Powell said they might be the best team in the state regardless of class.

"If I were to rank an all-class top 10, it would have Aurora at the top," Powell said. "They clearly have all the talent in the world, the best talent in Class B, and should be a heavy favorite to win Class B after three frustrating years as runner-up."

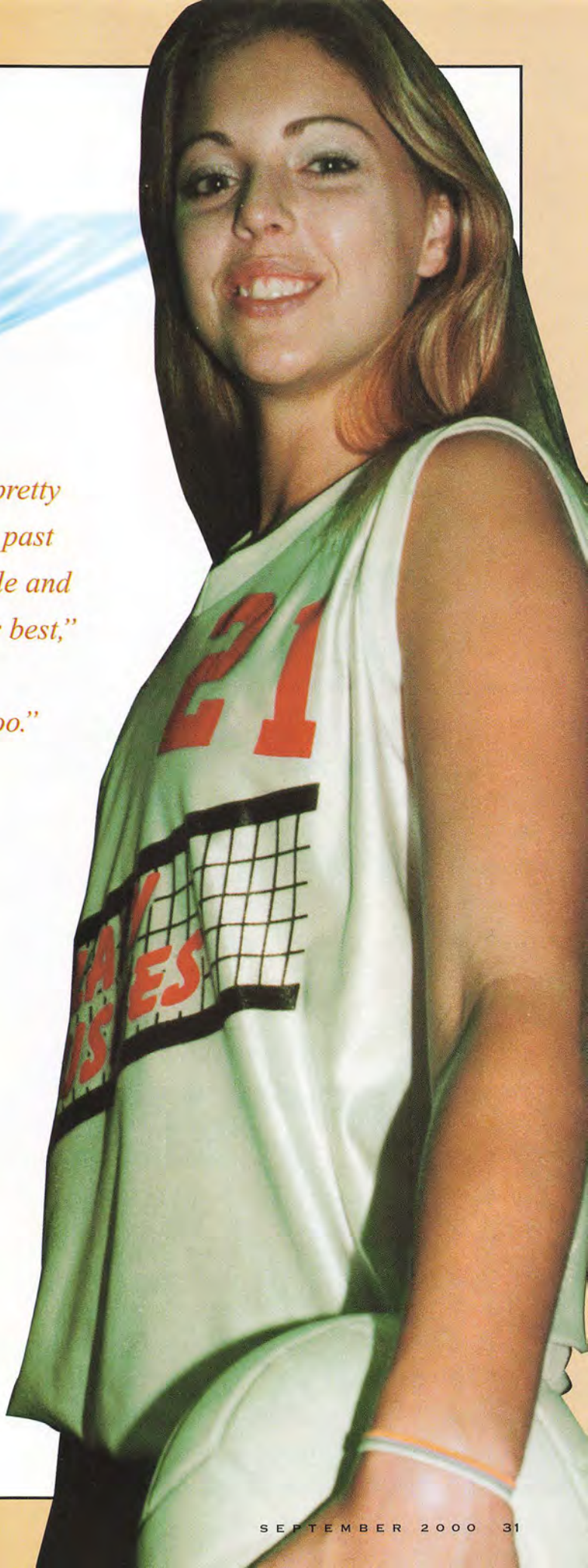
Much of that high praise revolves around the high-powered Aurora offense, led by Deininger, a possible Division I recruit, and Groothius, a likely Division I recruit. Still, with all this talent it takes leadership to mold the players into the type of team it takes to win a championship trophy. As a senior, Deininger knows the job is hers.

"Around here we take senior leadership pretty seriously. I have watched the older girls the past couple of years and they have led by example and by encouraging the other players to do their best," she says.

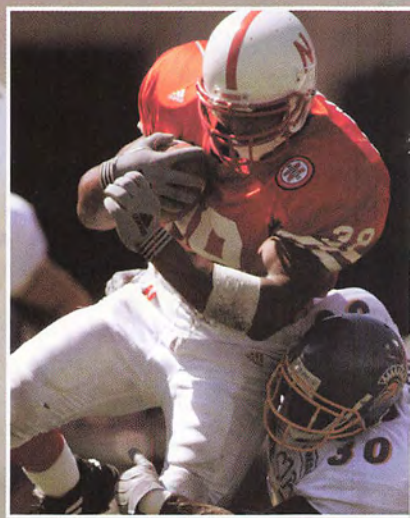
"That's the kind of leader I want to be, too."

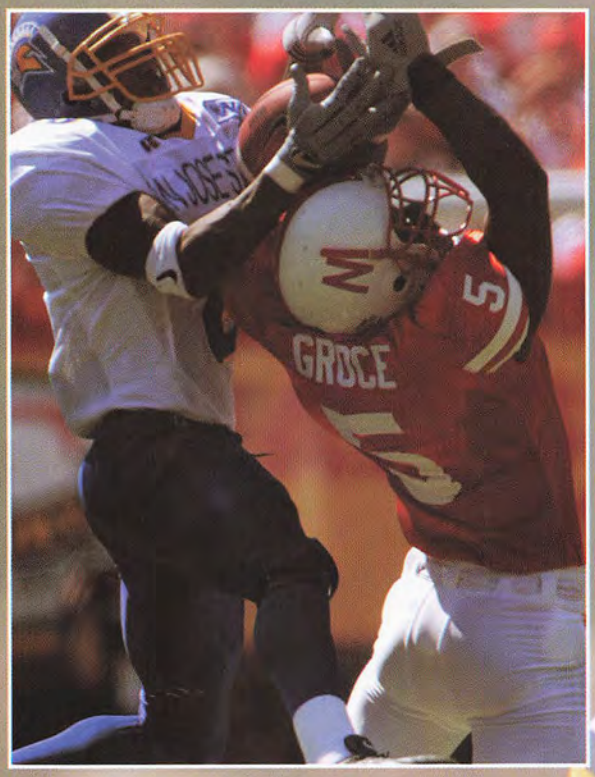
Deininger's a noted self-starter, but she admits the talk around town – the anticipation of finally winning that elusive state championship – also adds fuel to the fire.

"We know people in Aurora expect a lot of us this year, but that's OK because we expect a lot, too," she says. "It has been hard to lose in the finals like we have, but it will make the glory of winning all the greater." nsa



SCOREBOARD	FINAL
Nebraska	49
San Jose State	13

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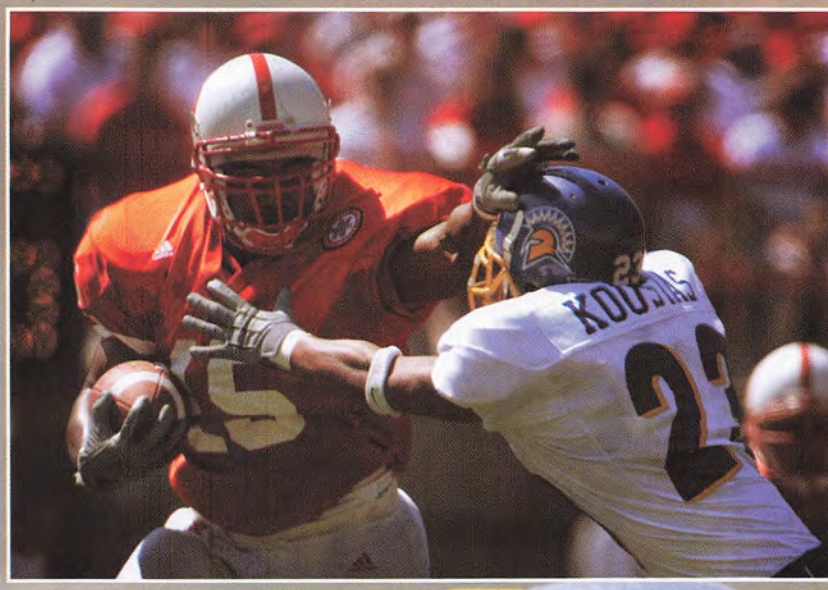
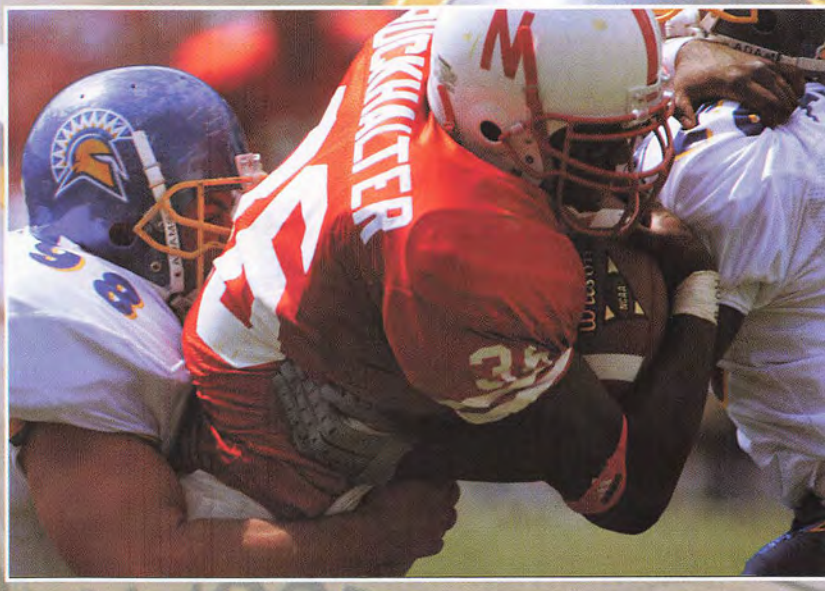
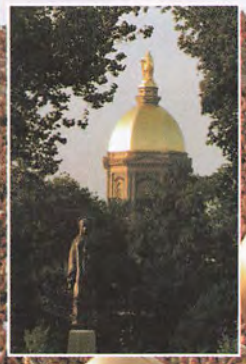
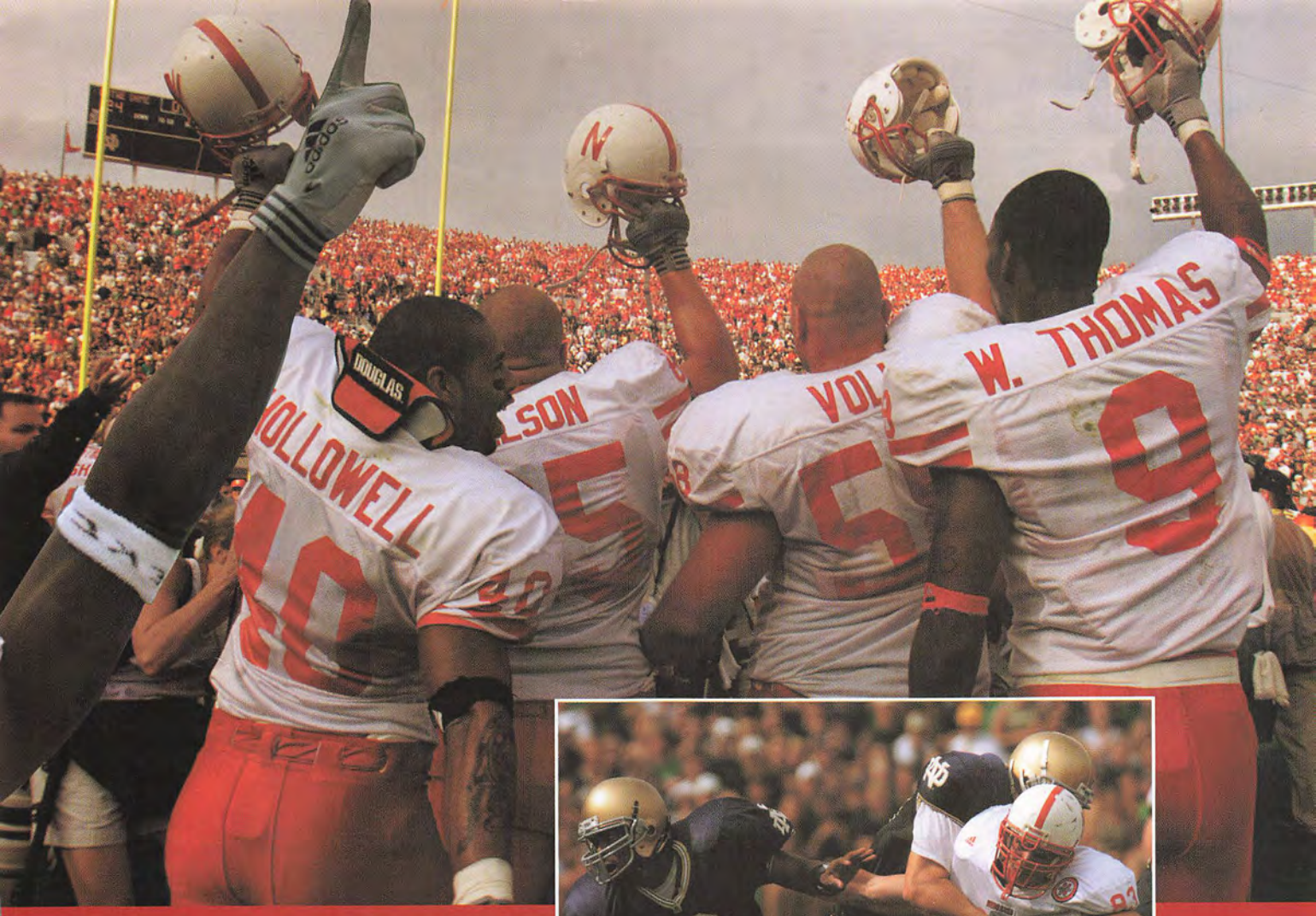


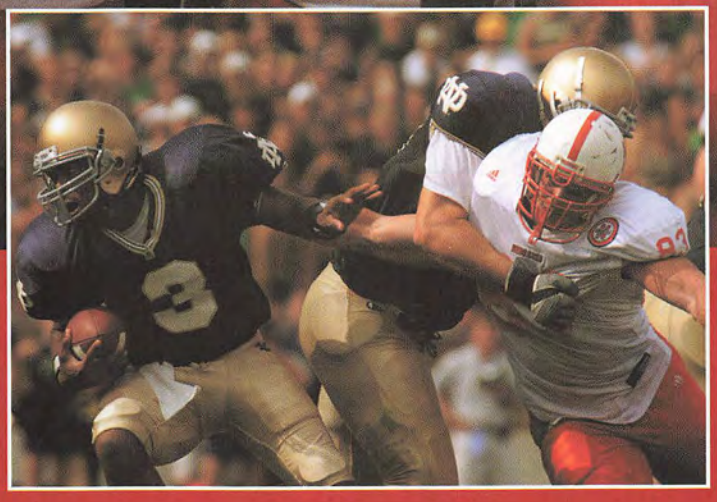


NEWCOMBE

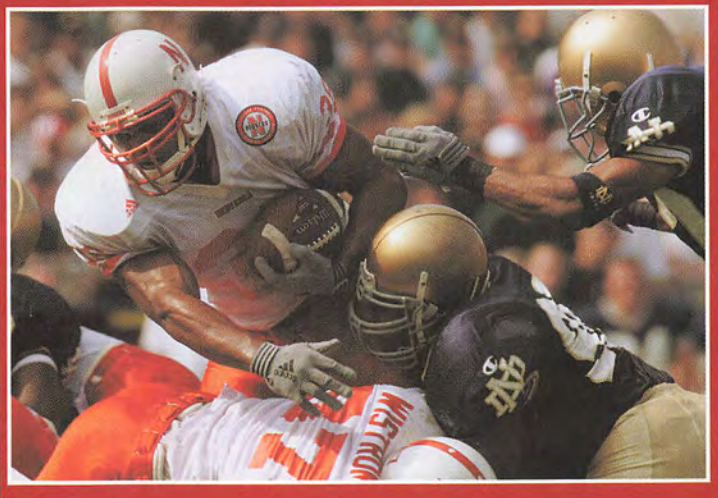


SCOREBOARD	OVERTIME
Nebraska	27
Notre Dame	24


DOUGLAS
W. THOMAS
9



CATHOLICS FOR NEBRASKA



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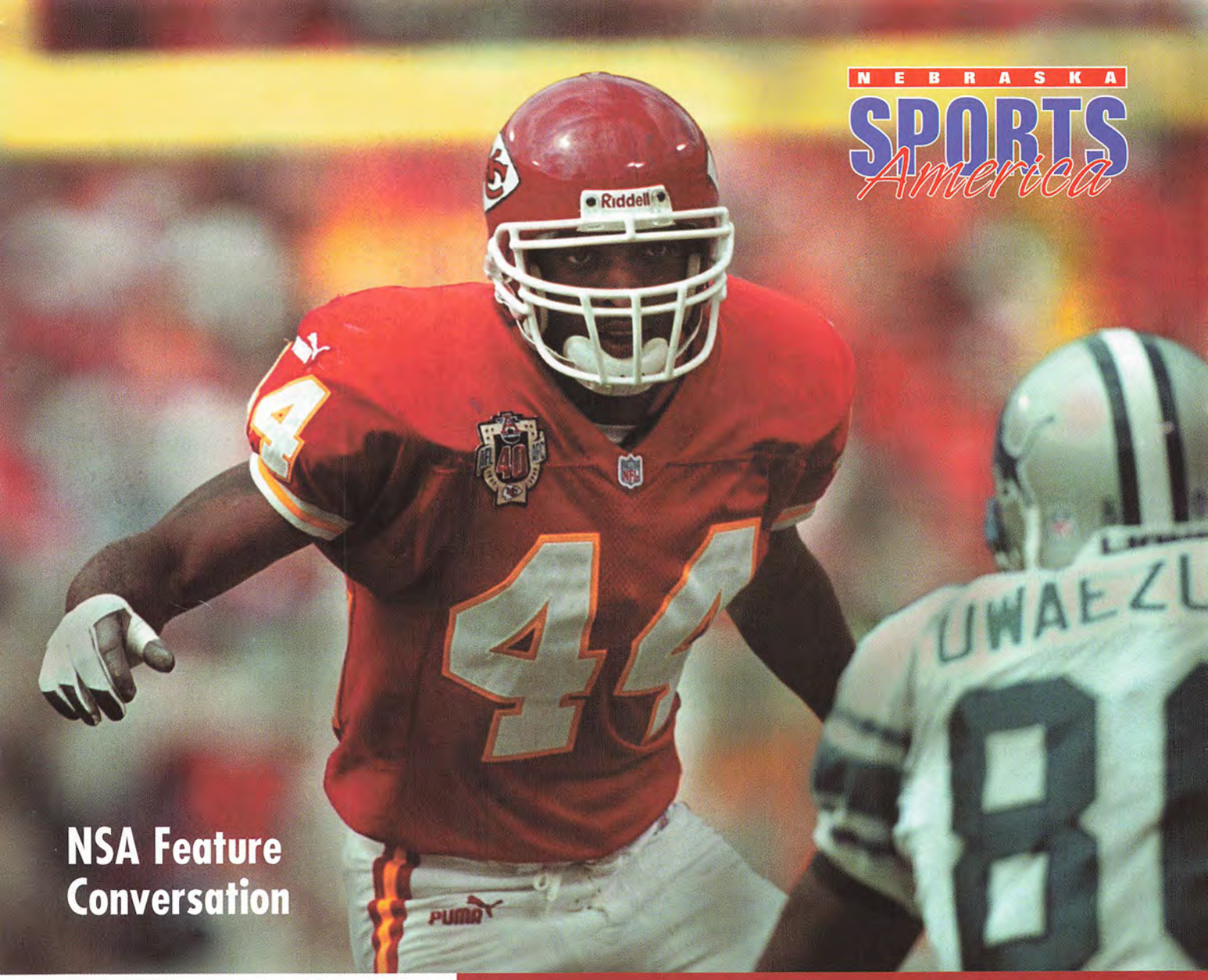


NSA Feature Conversation

NFL Spotlight

ERIC WARFIELD

by Kevin Warneke

Eric Warfield won't promise a Kansas City playoff berth.

He won't pledge that the Chiefs will win more games than last year.

The former Husker is more interested in talking about the Chief's approach to the 2000 season: Kansas City won't back away from anyone. Look for more aggressive play, he promised, on both sides of the ball.

First, some facts. The Chiefs still are old as dirt. And, their roster features some new faces. Gone are Tamarick Vanover, Reggie Tongue and, most noticeably, future Hall of Famer Derrick Thomas.

Warfield took a break during training camp at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls to talk about the Chiefs in 2000. He hopes the season will end with him firmly entrenched as Kansas City's left cornerback – and a playoff berth, of course.

NSA: *Talk about how the Chiefs will fare this season.*
Warfield: It's obvious that we lost a lot of great players this year. But we've added a lot of players with the same amount of potential that we lost - some even better. Right now, the team looks very good. ... At training camp, everything seems to f all into place. The running game is looking very good, and the receivers have surprised me more than anything. Andre (Rison) is coming off a slow season last year, and has been looking good. He's dropped his weight and got his speed back up. DA (Derrick Alexander) is always going to produce. Everything on offense is looking good.
The defense looks outstanding – even though we have the absence of Derrick Thomas, Lew Bush is looking to fill – I won't say completely fill his shoes – but is looking to do a good job.

NSA: *Is that an obvious void?*
Warfield: He's a great player who is gone - who will be missed. We have confidence in Lew that he can do the job. He's won't be the same as Derrick, or accomplish what Derrick accomplished. We're pretty sure he can get the job done.

NSA: *Would you term last season (the Chiefs went 9-7 and tied for first in the AFC West, but didn't qualify for the playoffs) as a disappointment?*
Warfield: We had a lot of games that were in our hands, that we let go at times. I won't say it was a new team, it was a new atmosphere with a new head coach. It was Gun's first year. I think he did an excellent job. Even though we didn't make the playoffs, we had many opportunities that we didn't take control of.

NSA: *What kind of coach is Gunther Cunningham?*
Warfield: I love him. . . . He's really got the team to come together. He had a lot of players on their toes worried; he came in and made a lot of big cuts, even on the coaching staff. There was a lot of players looking over their shoulders. They were kind of worried. Gun just wants the best people around on his staff and on the team. That's what he's getting, and he's making people play hard.

NSA: *Where does Eric Warfield fit in on the 2000 team?*
Warfield: Hopefully, as a starter. Right now, I'm going out and trying to make myself better.

NSA: *Are you to the point (in your career) where you'd like to be?*
Warfield: The first year, I didn't think I could play at all. Then, they put me in the position where I had to go out and play - when the put me in the nickel spot - I had to go out and play. There was some doubt that I could perform when the lights came on. I kind of surprised myself in how well I did. There was still some doubt in my mind because at the corner position it's not always going to be your day and people will catch passes on you. That was something that I really couldn't accept. If I had a bad game, my head was done. That's something you have to accept. Right now, I think I've gotten over that.

NSA: *Are there too many Nebraska players on the Chiefs' roster?*
Warfield: I don't think so. Nebraska has a lot of great players that come out of there. I've had a lot of success in the past, and I'm pretty sure I can have more in the future."

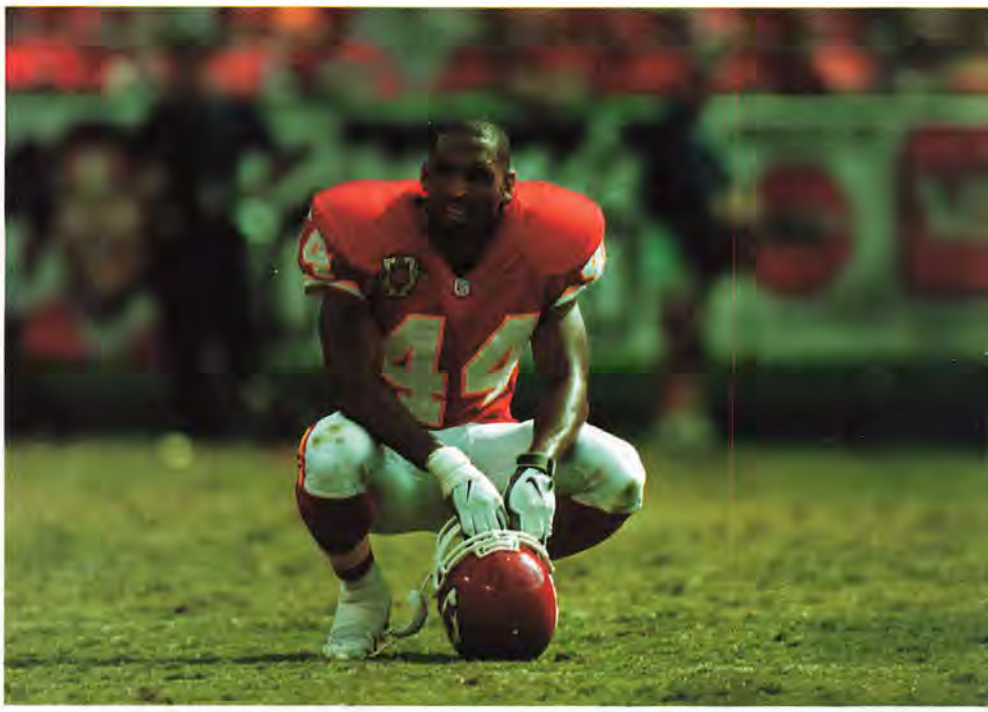
NSA: *What kind of football will fans see the Chiefs play this year?*
Warfield: More aggressive. The defense will be very much aggressive. The offense is opening up a lot more.

NSA: *Will anything but the playoffs be acceptable?*
Warfield: I don't want to put the pressure on ... and try to give an answer to that. We have a great team right now and I know we have a really good chance of making the playoffs and hopefully going all the way.

NSA: *You're avoiding the question.*
Warfield: I'm trying.

NSA: *What are your thoughts about your time at Nebraska?*
Warfield: I had a great time. I came away with a couple of national championship rings and met a lot of great people. I couldn't have had a better place. But I've moved on and I have to make the best of what I have here?

NSA: *Do you wear the rings on occasion?*
Warfield: My mom and dad have the rings. I think they're in better hands than with me. nsa



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Triple Play

Three of Omaha's best public course holes

by Kevin Warneke

Pick any golf course – public or private, well-manicured or rough around its edges – and one hole typically stands out.

It might be the view from above or the trees on each side. It might be a green that seems better placed on an envelope. Call them signature holes, but be sure to call them special.

Here's a hole from three different public courses in Omaha that stand out:

Johnny Goodman Golf Course no. 18

First, it's 442 yards from the back tees. Next, the par 4 finishing hole typically heads straight into a prevailing south wind. Finally, the course's No. 2 handicap hole entices would-be long hitters to try to master the hill that most often stymies their drives.

Still, Gene Johnson, head golf professional at Goodman, said he typically receives compliments when golfers retire to the clubhouse after their rounds.

"They say it's a good finishing hole," Johnson said. "I think it's as a good of a finishing hole as you'll find."

Conquering the hole really is simple, Johnson said. Two good shots, he said, means a chance of birdie or par. "There's plenty of room in the fairway," he said.

Still, golfers must avoid the trees that line both sides of the hole. They must avoid the large sand trap that hugs the right side of the green. Finally, and most important, they must strategically place their second shot on the green for optimal scoring possibilities. "Putting downhill on this green is not fun," he said.

Lucky golfers find the wind to their backs when they play the finishing hole at Goodman. "Then, it's a drive and a short iron to the green," Johnson said.

Still, he neglected to mention to those fortunate few still must navigate the green.

Benson Park Golf Course no. 5

Bob Baber hears the same complaints about the par 4, dogleg-left No. 5. He takes them as compliments.

"They say 'It's hard. It should be a par 5.'" Baber dis-

agrees. "I think it's an excellent par 4."

Baber doesn't have to worry much about the 90-degree turn the hole takes some 200 yards from the box. Long hitters (250 yards are necessary from the back tees) who stay right find themselves with a long to medium iron to the green with a chance for birdie or par.

The rest of us find ourselves in not-so-pretty places. Like trapped along the trees that line the hole's left side. Or worse, in the creek that travels along those trees. Or not far enough off the box to provide a straight shot at the large green, which falls 440 yards from the championship tees.

Slicers find this hole works to their advantage. Trees on the right side aren't thick enough to thwart most shots. The rough is managable and the green still reachable in two.

Baber doesn't provide much tangible advice for players trying to master Benson's No. 1 handicap hole. "Hope there's no wind in your face and hit a drive that makes the corner."

Elmwood Golf Course no. 7

When Elmwood Park Golf Course needed a makeover during the mid-1990s, head pro Jim Etter decided nothing was sacred – even its Hall of Fame hole.

Etter was observing from above the No. 7 tee box when he realized the possibilities. The hole, a long par 3 with an elevated green, always had been considered one of the best in the state. "Up there, I realized what a beautiful hole it could be from back here. We wanted to add length to the course."

So the par 3 No. 7 grew a little. Now 294 yards (back tees) and par 4, the hole, despite its length, still has some bite to go with its elevated tee box.

Big hitters want to drive the hole, but, Etter said, typically find their shots gobbled up by the steep incline leading to the green.

The elevated tee box also makes the fairway seem all that more narrow. Trees on the left separate the course from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Especially errant shots find themselves headed toward UNO's water treatment plant. Shots that veer right end up in the trees that separate the hole from nearby No. 6.

Etter said the resigned hole initially caused some Elmwood golfers to have difficulty letting go. No more. "They realize it's a beautiful hole - and it still isn't easy." nsa

In the stands

WITH TERRY L. HENION

A Flick of Her Wrist

You've seen it happen dozens of times. In a bar, when the liquor flows freely and inbibers start to feel frisky, invariably a couple of them will pair off for a test of strength.

They will roll up sleeves, put on grim faces and prepare to arm wrestle in an attempt to prove, well, who knows what?

But you won't find Mary McConnaughey of Omaha, at age 40, perhaps the best female arm wrestler in the world, doing it.

"I don't 'pull' with people who have been drinking, ever," she said. "For two reasons. One, what would it prove if I beat them or they managed to beat me? And two, I can't take a risk of getting injured. I have invested too much time and energy in this over the years."

Seventeen years, to be exact. That was when McConnaughey, a recent graduate of Peru State College, was entered in an arm wrestling tournament by a male friend. She won. Then she entered an open tournament a few weeks later. She won again. Nothing to it, she thought. Just sit down, put up my massive right arm, casually pin the opponent and say, "Who's next...?"

Except it isn't quite that easy.

"The next tournament I entered, I got hammered by a woman about half my size," she said. "She put me down so fast and easy. I thought, hey, there must be more to this than I thought there was as far as technique and stuff.

So, I decided I had to make a choice. Either softball or arm wrestling. I chose to learn about arm wrestling."

And now, she is preparing to defend her world championship in October in Virginia Beach, Va., a title she won last year at the World Tournament in Russia. To win the title, she had to upset the Russian woman who had held the crown for the past three years.

"I surprised her," McConnaughey said. "She didn't think I would beat her, so she wasn't ready. She will be this time, and so will I."

Titles come easy to McConnaughey, who works as a laboratory manager for an Omaha food ingredient supplier. Recently, she won the masters' (133 pounds and over), women's right hand (177 and over) and women's left hand (177 and over) divisions at the American Armsports Association national championships.

Those wins upped the number of her national titles during the past 17 years to 13. They also brought her mention in Sports Illustrated magazine's "Faces in the Crowd" section.

And how does one get to be a world champion arm wrestler? Well, there is weight training, of course, and one must have quickness. But perhaps more important is finding a technique that works.

"My style is to 'cup' the opponent's hand and at the go try to pull their hand toward me first," she said. "Anything you can do to break down their leverage is what you want. And if you are able to pull them toward you, pull the hand away, they have no leverage."

McConnaughey said she studies film of opponents and match referees. Each official has a different rhythm and way in which he or she "sets" the opponents in position and then says "go."

"Our matches are over in two or three seconds usually," she said, "so if you get beat on the go, you're probably not going to recover."

McConnaughey said her main interest now in arm wrestling is to pass along the nuances of the sport to youngsters. Every Tuesday night, McConnaughey's house becomes a mecca for "pullers" around the region who flock there to train with her.

"I have four arm wrestling tables at home and we give them a workout," she said, laughing. "We have from eight to 24 people there at any given time, and a lot of them are the younger kids who are learning the sport."

For the longest time, McConnaughey was the underdog in world-level competition and admits to even being a bit intimidated by the big-name wrestlers. But her upset win last year at the world championships changed all that.

"I used to get kind of scared before a match when I would look at them and see the 'big eyes' thing," she said. "But now I much more confident. I just go about my business and leave those psyche-out games and hollering and screaming to the others."

And so, she is deep into preparations for the World Tournament in October. And one thing is certain: As she labors to improve her "pulling" championship, she will have friends and foes alike pulling for her to repeat as champion, this time on home soil.

"It's all about earning respect," she said. "And I've earned mine, I think." nsa

Terry Henion is a long-time sportswriter who has worked for the Omaha World-Herald and Hastings Tribune.

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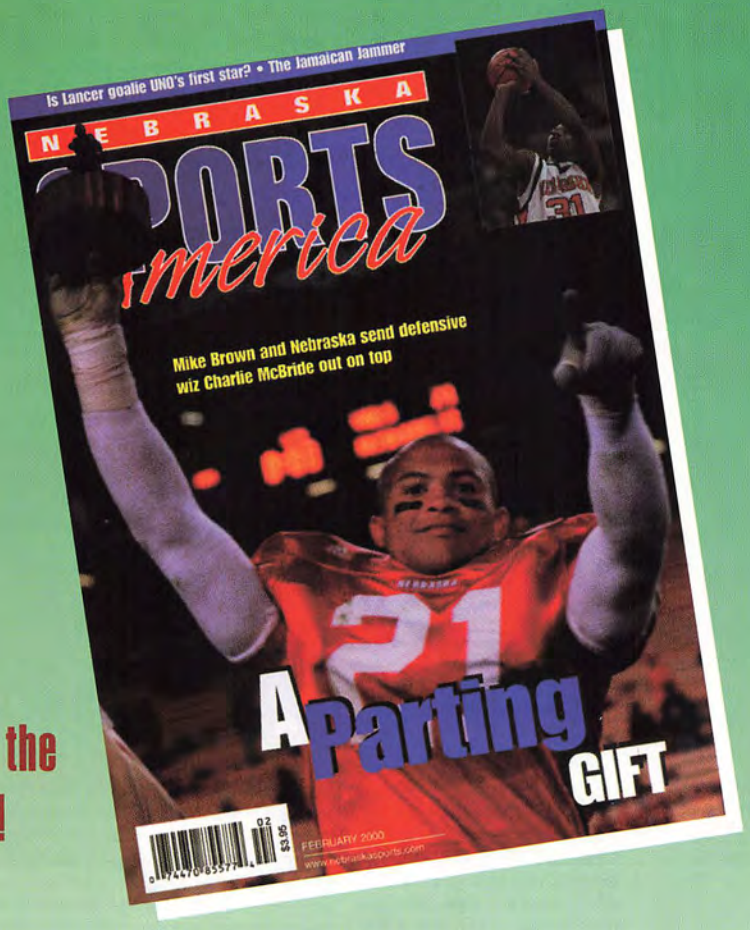
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